

Beefing up Resistance Onscreen: Cow Politics and Non-vegetarian Carnivals in Post- 2015 Malayalam Films

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Abstract

With the rise of Hindutva fundamentalism in India, the hegemony of vegetarianism and the resultant othering of subaltern/non-vegetarian food cultures have intensified. Consequently, Dalits, Adivasis and various religious minorities are being subject to physical and symbolic forms of violence on grounds of their dietary habits. While members of these communities, mostly in the Northern states of India, became victims of lynching by cow vigilantes, acts of resistance termed as ‘Beef Festivals’ were organised across Kerala for a couple of years, starting in 2015. Aided by the peculiar socio-political climate of the state, Malayalam films rapidly assimilated the celebratory/fearless spirit of these festivals of resistance. Reassertion of non-vegetarian culinary traditions, specifically those that are deemed transgressive in the national milieu, by placing them in the political context of Hindutva has become a practice in Malayalam films. By critically looking at select Malayalam films produced in this period, the paper attempts to study the carnivalesque performances in these films and argues that they construct carnival spaces that subvert the food-based hierarchies prevalent in India.

Keywords: Malayalam films, beef, carnival, Hindutva

Introduction

Ever since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)¹-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government came to power at the centre in 2014, many Indian states strengthened laws regarding cattle slaughter and trade. In addition to the state-imposed legal restrictions on cattle trade and slaughter, the severity of which varies across states, restrictions on the consumption of bovine meat get enforced through violent forms of coercion from the

part of *gau-rakshaks* (cow vigilantes). The lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq² in September 2015 in the Dadri district of Uttar Pradesh on suspicion of storing beef in his house was followed by more incidents of violent attacks on Dalits and Muslims, predominantly in the North Indian states. Incidents of systemic violence perpetrated against cattle farmers, religious minorities and Dalit communities suggest that the state intervenes in the food culture in an attempt to establish culinary homogeneity. As Michael Bruckert argues, culinary nationalism in India functions through the exclusion of certain food items, rather than through a positive affirmation of national cuisines (315). The aforementioned lynching of Akhlaq had triggered serious discussions on the rising hegemony of vegetarianism in India. Such episodes of lynching by cow vigilantes specifically targeting Dalits and Muslims have escalated since 2014 (Mukherjee 79), leading to multiple forms of resistance. Cow vigilantism can also be understood as an attempt to other certain food practices and to strategically impose a national cuisine. Much before 2014, university campuses across India, mostly through their Dalit and minority student organisations, have made attempts to resist the systemic ways of intrusion on the largely subaltern beef-eating dietary culture of India.³ But beef festivals emerged in Kerala only in the context of the post-2015 beef politics, specifically the instances of lynching as mentioned earlier (Shahina).

Beef festivals have asserted beef as a dominant part of the diet of the Dalit population without taking into consideration the heterogeneous nature of Dalit dietary habits (Pathania 271-2), and the claims of beef festivals in asserting Dalit cultural identity can possibly lead to “*essentializing* cultural traits as stereotyped markers of caste groups, and *masking variability* within castes” (Natrajan 289). Therefore, one could argue that beef festivals may also, thus, ignore the plural nature of Dalit culinary practices and celebrate only beef, often in certain limited varieties. Even so, in

contemporary India governed by Hindutva supremacists, advocating beef as a “counter-cuisine” becomes “a political act of subversion and resistance” (Sathyamala 887).

Although these festivals of resistance reveal limitations at the ideological level by building space for the creation of counter hegemony which can act as an alternate form of hegemony (Pathania 273), the particular political context of its emergence makes it a significant political tool in resisting Hindutva fundamentalism.

In Kerala, both the ruling Communist and the opposition Congress parties had organized beef festivals since Akhlaq’s lynching, making it a mass protest. Since then, there has been a surge in the depiction of beef cuisines in popular Malayalam films.

Taking off from beef festivals, these films depict the consumption of beef as a carnival ritual. Our analysis seeks to understand the carnival of non-vegetarian food, notably beef, and the discourses surrounding it in the films *Angamali Diaries* (Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery) and *Jallikattu* (Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery), while also taking into consideration specific scenes from other post-2015 Malayalam films that politicise non-vegetarian food against Hindutva. While Bollywood films of the period, inspired by its propensity for nationalism, abjectifies and others non-vegetarian food, particularly beef (Mubarki 298), contemporary Malayalam films show strong and consistent resistance to this Hindu extremist tendency through an assertion of the silenced non-vegetarian culinary traditions. Our focus is to critically look at how the Malayalam films under consideration here deliberately engage with the politics of beef consumption in contemporary India. This paper tries to make a critical textual analysis by examining the cultural idiosyncrasies of Kerala that facilitate the politics of representing non-vegetarian food on-screen.

Food Politics in Malayalam Films and its Socio-Political Milieu

Salt N' Pepper (Dir. Aashiq Abu), released in 2011, combined food and middle-aged love, and it was followed by several Malayalam films centred on the thematics of food. Kunal Ray and Mochish K. S. observe that the year 2011 also marked the beginning of the new-generation Malayalam films noticeable for their progressive values. In contrast to the earlier decades, these films prioritize the local perspective, focusing on the dialect, geography and food over a male protagonist (40-41). Aju K. Narayanan and Chery Jacob argue that as food gets showcased as a luxury item, often as a fetish, in new-generation Malayalam films, various aspects of food production, its relation with nature, and the farmers involved in the process get ignored (126-128). In another piece of research on the representation of liquor in Malayalam films, Narayanan and Jacob observe that in films of the earlier decades, guided by Brahminical dominance and notions of ritual purity, alcoholism was a controversial subject and the hero mostly abstained from it, whereas films from 2005, being mostly influenced by foreign films, use it as a visual motif devoid of any taboo (161).

While such radical tendencies of post-2011 films extended to redefining the engagement of women with food and food spaces, like in *Salt N' Pepper*, it is only after the beef festivals in Kerala that a deliberate engagement with the caste politics of food started becoming a trope in Malayalam films. In a pre-release interview of *Salt N' Pepper*, the director observes: “For a society that is so fond of food, this genre of cinema has not been really explored much in Mollywood, save for a few films” (Sathyendran). In Malayalam films of the earlier decades, food was largely a part of the comic interludes, be it the depiction of quirky combinations of food, overindulgence in food or pretences regarding non-vegetarian food. A recurrent comic motif was the attitude towards non-vegetarian food by characters who pretended to be of the *sadhu/sadhvi* (an ascetic revered as per the Hindu religious traditions) surreptitiously

relishing non-vegetarian food after claims of following an exclusive vegetarian and *sattvik*⁴ diet — as in the films *Minnaminunginum Minnukettu* (Dir. Thulasidas) and *Nandanam* (Dir. Ranjith Balakrishnan). In films such as these, eating habits were solely used to demonstrate the hypocritical attitude of the characters and not to engage with the politics of vegetarianism or the notion of ritual pollution/purity. Apart from providing comic relief in the more serious family drama films, food moments added humour to the comedy films of the 1990s while mostly abstaining from discussions of the larger socio-cultural implications of food. For instance, in *My Dear Muthachan* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikad) a police officer demands biryani as bribe from an accused person. In other comedy films of the period such as *CID Unnikrishnan B.A., B.Ed.*

(Dir. Rajasenan), *Kilukil Pambaram* (Dir. Thulasidas), *Gajakesariyogam* (Dir. P. G. Viswambharan), and *Bheeshmacharya* (Dir. Cochin Haneefa), indulgence and overeating contribute to the comic food moments. Furthermore, in earlier Malayalam films, slaughterhouse scenes remained a metaphorical presence to foreground the violence and masculinity of the characters associated with these spaces. These films mostly used visuals of food as indicators of class relations and gender performances. It is with the release of *Salt N' Pepper* that food started becoming a significant visual presence in Malayalam films, at times extending to unrealistic food pornographic representations, as in *Ustad Hotel* (Dir. Anwar Rasheed), *Da Thadiya* (Dir. Aashiq Abu), *Spanish Masala* (Dir. Lal Jose), *Proprietors Kammath & Kammath* (Dir.

Thomson K. Thomas and Kanal Kannan) and many others. Food porn often refers to the representation of dishes in fantastic qualities, colours and style that are very often impossible for home and amateur cooks to attain (Koh 123). Although visual and aural registers of food are non-metaphorical presences and inevitable to the plot and characterisation of these films, it is since the BJP-led government's ascent to power at

the centre in 2014 that the representation of food in Malayalam films started bearing political undertones. Contemporary Malayalam films have emerged as sites of contestation against the hegemony of vegetarianism by providing a carnival of non-vegetarian cuisines. The increased popularity of over-the-top (OTT) platforms from the Covid-19 period has contributed to growing viewership for regional films, crossing regional and linguistic divisions. The recent Tamil film *Annapoorani* (Dir. Nilesh Krishnaa) centres on the life of a Brahmin woman, who, having become a chef against her family's objection, is in a dilemma about cooking and consuming non-vegetarian dishes. The way in which the film associates Lord Ram with non-vegetarian food also offended the religious sentiments of a few, and as a result, Netflix had to take the film down.⁵ This points at the nationwide influence that the OTT films wield.

In fact, compared to other regional film industries and Bollywood, Malayalam films enjoy certain prerogatives in matters of the uninhibited representation of non-vegetarian food, particularly beef, owing to the atypical social and political climate of Kerala. The very geography of the state with its long coastal line makes fish a vital part of dietary habits in Kerala. While this may have facilitated the state's tolerance towards non-vegetarian food, there are other grounds for the higher level of acceptance of beef in the state. As slaughter of cattle, including that of cows, for meat is not legally restricted in Kerala⁶, public partaking of beef as in beef festivals and the representation of it in media do not involve the risk of facing legal consequences. In a state like Kerala where beef is a part of the dietary habits of upper caste Hindus like Nairs (Osella and Osella 170), and upper caste Christians (Abraham 33) it cannot be regarded as an exclusive subaltern food. Given the fact that the cattle population was scanty in 19th century Kerala (Balakrishnan 174-5) and as the available ones were solely used for agricultural purposes (177), flesh of cattle was rarely a part of the diet of Dalits and other lower

caste communities. In *Native Life in Travancore*, Samuel Mateer observes that the members of the Paraya community and the Pulayas of the Eastern region ate beef (38), whereas the Sudras abstained from its consumption (112) as did the Western Pulayas (39). Mateer further notes that, although Pulayas belonged to the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy in Kerala, the Pulayas of the Western region, on the premise of their abstinence from consuming beef, considered themselves superior to the Parayas. However, it was the difficulty in obtaining beef and not food-based preconceptions or ritual proscriptions that kept it out from the quotidian diet of the upper caste Syrian Christians in the 19th century Kerala (Mateer 160). Beef consumption was, therefore, not historically a customary feature of the dietary practices of every subaltern community in Kerala. Even so, determined by poverty and ritual pollution, rats and chameleons, being more easily accessible, formed a part of the dietary habits of Dalits and other lower caste communities in Kerala (qtd in Balakrishnan 181).

In Kerala, thus, the history of beef consumption is not a subjugated one, and in contemporary Kerala, beef cuisines associated with upper caste Syrian Christian culinary tradition like beef *ularthiyathu* (a type of roasted beef) are quite popular.

Nevertheless, the states' association with beef dishes is not without intolerance from the Hindutva forces. For instance, during the Indian consulate's food festival held in Germany in 2019, a Kerala-based organisation was pressurized by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a radical right-wing Hindu organisation, to remove beef curry from its menu.⁷ Further, in 2020, a post on beef *ularthiyathu* in the twitter account of Kerala tourism was subject to controversies after being targeted by right-wing groups. As religious minorities like Christians and Muslims in India reportedly have a higher incidence of beef consumption (Natrajan and Jacob 60), the peculiar population share of Kerala with 26.56 % Muslims and 18.38 % Christians⁸ is a contributing factor to the

prevalence of beef consumption in the state. In Kerala, the incidence of beef consumption is higher among the Muslims, at over 50% owing to their higher population share, and amongst the Dalits due the history of Dalit reform movements (Natrajan and Jacob 62). Further, the electoral politics of the state has consistently ensured power to either of the two political fronts, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) or the United Democratic Alliance (UDF),⁹ preventing the BJP-led NDA from holding power. Thus, Hindutva fundamentalism has largely been unable to exercise its influence in the state. In conclusion, Kerala's atypical socio-political climate ensures that the filmic confrontation with vegetarian hegemony does not intervene with its commercial success.

Jallikattu and Angamali Diaries: The Carnival Spaces in Malayalam Films

Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque is based on the carnivals of medieval Europe and the Renaissance which sought to destabilize the power structures of the Holy Roman Empire of the period as well as the Roman Catholic Church. He identifies carnivals as spaces that subverted hierarchies and resisted the restrictive regimes of religion and the state while “[offering] a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical” (6) facet of the world. As opposed to the spiritual and the ecclesiastical, carnivals emphasized the materialistic dimensions of the body, specifically through the acts of eating and drinking, and maintained an essence of celebration. For the common people, carnival was, therefore, a liberatory experience even as it carried a spirit of rebellion. Drawing on the folk celebration of carnival, Malayalam films' resistance to the dogmatic and authoritarian ways of Hindutva and the dominant ideologies at the centre in matters of food can be analysed. The series of beef festivals organised across Kerala, following the lynching of Akhlaq in 2015, contributed

to a period of “revolutionary euphoria” (Lachmann et al. 116) that also permeated Malayalam films in due course, as evinced in their carnivalesque engagement with non-vegetarian food. Carnival spaces in these films, by celebrating the othered food, disrupting the food hierarchies based on ritual purity, and subverting the hegemony of vegetarianism proclaim liberation from the power structures and hierarchies of the society and “[build] a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (Bakhtin 6). The rapid shift to a detailing, often to food porn extent, of non-vegetarian cuisines in these films cannot be disregarded solely as an extension of the dietary habits of Kerala.

Apart from the images of the cooked meat dishes and people relishing it, the camera in these films also captures the functioning of butcheries with utmost precision, often employing close shots. Such uninhibited depictions of raw meat as well as the process of slaughtering and dicing contradicts with the mainstream film narratives that selectively aestheticize the dishes, thereby detaching the audience from its corporeality. The butcheries in the Malayalam films discussed in this paper are largely food spaces where people eagerly wait for their parcels, demand cuts specifying the dish that is to be prepared and even fight for the (best) rib cut of beef as in *Varayan* (Dir. Jijo Joseph). With such discussions of non-vegetarian dishes, butcheries in Malayalam films have become desirable spaces that evoke taste and augment the scope of cooking spaces.

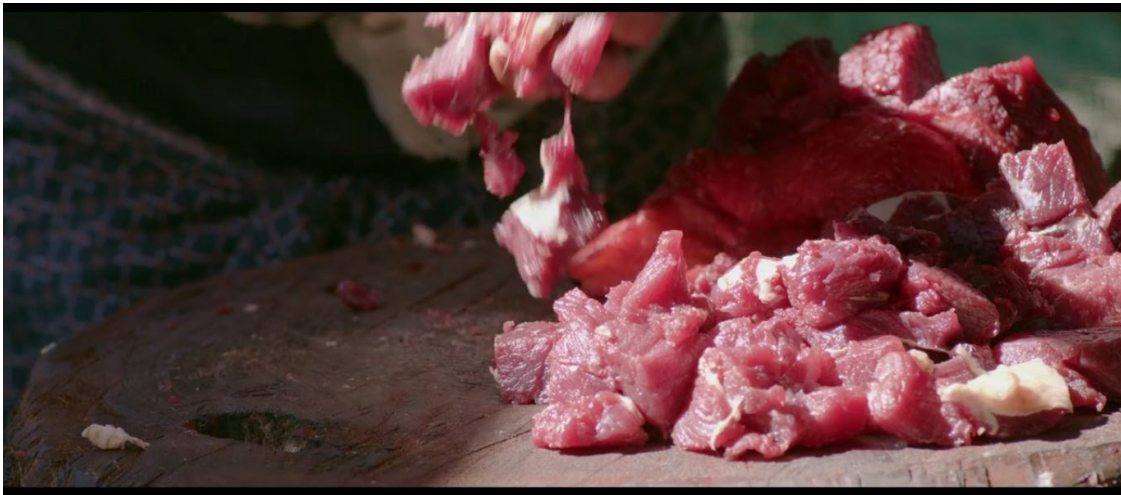


Figure 1. A close-up of diced beef in *Jallikattu*. A part of the butcher's hand is visible as he grabs a handful of the meat.



Figure 2. A close-up of the butcher dicing pork in *Angamali Diaries*. The butcher's body is blurred revealing at most the hands at work.

With the protagonist running a butchery and taking up the profession of a butcher, *Angamali Diaries* has conferred sanctity to the space of the butchery, dissociating it from ritual impurity and violence. Filmic focus has, thus, significantly shifted from the portrayal of the butcher as a villain as in earlier Malayalam films to the act of butchering, connecting it to consumption, and normalising the acts involved. The

grotesque display of bodily corporeality, death and billingsgate make the butcheries of *Jallikattu* and *Angamali Diaries* carnival spaces. Although Bakhtin identifies billingsgate as the language of the marketplace (16), that used in the butcheries of these films is atypical of the space. It is not the crude language of the marketplace, but billingsgate in these butcheries is constituted by sexual innuendos causing embarrassment to several of its customers. Further, these films aestheticize raw meat through close-up shots of dicing, and normalise the on-screen representation of the act of slaughter. *Jallikattu* begins with flash cuts that take up the pace of dicing of meat, interspersing scenes from Varkey's butchery with other activities typical of a Sunday morning in the village. As Varkey and Antony dice up large chunks of meat, an impatient crowd waits outside the butchery, the majority of whom are on their way to attend the holy mass. Characters are shown to compromise on being late to church, but not on the cut of meat, making their visits to the butchery and consumption of beef a ritual of utmost importance, inseparable from the act of attending mass on a Sunday.

There is a shade of customariness in the way people hang the parcels of meat over the branches of a mango tree in the churchyard, the tree becoming suggestive of a Christmas tree with decorations, invoking the celebratory nature of the carnival. A shot inside the church showing the blessing of the bread and wine for Holy Communion, interspaces a believer's arrival at the church and his hanging of the beef packet on the tree. The tree outside the church, bearing the bags of meat comparable to mutilated flesh, is reminiscent of the idea of the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. In a subsequent shot, the camera captures both the tree and the church cross as placed horizontally, although the latter is in a relatively elevated position. The tree is on par with the Church cross, bearing the flesh that is as ritualised and inevitable for the believers on Sundays as the transubstantiated blood and flesh of Christ. It is to be noted

that even the pattern in which the meat bags are arranged on the tree resembles the shape of a cross. While the church and the cross rely on the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, it is the flesh of the animal that makes the tree in the courtyard a significant one for the believers, who celebrate both the mutilated bodies with ritual fervour.



Figure 3. Parcels of beef hanging on a tree in the front yard of a church in *Jallikattu*. A church cross also forms part of the visual.

In the final part of *Jallikattu*, there are visuals of men with flaming torches and electric ones chasing a buffalo, parodying a church procession. In lieu of a cross as in a church procession, the crowd follows a buffalo, and the abusive words of the men form the hymns in this carnivalesque performance of a procession. The pressing situation created by the buffalo roaming free in the village gets a celebratory divergence as men gather around Kuttachan, a hunter brought to capture the animal. This scene is a precursor to the final sequence of the film that points at the primitive tendencies of ego and violence in humans. Visuals of the cave men in the film, dressed up in animal hides and carrying stone tools in their hands, points at the long-standing carnivorous tendencies among humans.

Angamali Diaries emphasises meat-eating habits as a marker of regional and religious identities. The title song of the film, bearing folk elements, uses aural and visual imagery to establish the popularity of pork among the Christian community in the region of Angamali in Kerala. For the most part, the song intersperses visuals of church festivals with butchery and preparation of non-vegetarian dishes, while the lyrics progress asserting the religious (reference to church and Saint Gregorios) and the regional. The film depicts the pork dishes as a marker of the local identity. Carnival spaces provided by these films dismantle the food-based hierarchies by placing the non-vegetarian regional over the vegetarian national. Instead of attempting to generalize the foodways of Kerala, the regional gets specified and such emphasis on the regional is, again, an attribute of the New-generation Malayalam films (Ray and Mochish 41-42).

Thus, while the meat relished in *Angamali Diaries* is pork, it is duck in *Ee. Ma. Yau.* (Dir. Lijo Jose Pellissery) and beef in *Jallikattu*. In *Angamali Diaries*, there is a reference to pork cooked along with *koorkka* (Chinese potato), a popular dish often associated with Angamali. In the same film, there is a reference to pork cooked with raw plantains – a recipe that is followed in many parts of Kerala. Detailed verbal descriptions of the preparation of food helps in rooting cuisines to particular regions and communities, a way of reasserting the food culture, thereby strengthening its potential as a political tool of resistance. As in *Godha*, *Jallikattu* also resorts to an evocative detailing of beef *ularthiyathu* in a scene in which Kuriachan discusses with the caterer the menu for his daughter's betrothal. Later, while hearing the news that Varkey's buffalo has escaped, the caterer condescendingly remarks, "Without beef curry, can we even call it a feast?" This resounds with Das' words in *Godha* that "*porotta* and beef is not just a food, but a feeling" for Malayalis, emphasizing beef as a quotidian element in the dietary practices of Kerala.

In *Jallikattu*, along with the crowd, the camera follows the buffalo that broke out of Varkey's butchery, making it an object of relevance. For Antony, the buffalo embodies masculinity and subduing it guarantees him sexual authority over Varkey's sister Sophie. While Kuttachan and Antony were running for their sexual desires attempting to satisfy their toxic male egos, a significant section of the village was chasing a potential source of food. From Kuriachan, for whom the buffalo meant beef *ularthiyathu* that is to be served for his daughter's betrothal scheduled for the next day, to the parish priest, who unenthusiastically settled for pork, the buffalo that escaped slaughter is shown to have interrupted the meal plans of the villagers.

Bakhtin identifies the overturning of social hierarchies as a significant element contributing to the carnival spirit. Social roles of Kuttachan and Antony get reversed in the carnival space of *Jallikattu*. Kuttachan, who was detested by the villagers after getting detained in a drug case, gets invited back to the village from which he was cast out, as the villagers were confident that he could catch the buffalo. He arrives sitting on the bonnet of a jeep, carrying a rifle in his hands, which would not have been common outside the carnival space of the film. As the jeep climbs the hill road, he ascends the social ladder and is later welcomed by a group of admiring men raising slogans for him. Although Antony gets disregarded at this point, his social bearing changes as he subdues the buffalo, an act that additionally ensures him rights over Sophie's body. Set in the late 2010s in the hilly terrains of the Idukki district in Kerala, *Jallikattu* explores the gradual advancement of right wing politics in Kerala.¹⁰ By conforming to the laws of ritual pollution, the character Paul in the film wears the mask of a conformist Hindu¹¹, reflecting the masks in the carnival procession. This character is described as *sattvik* in S. Hareesh's short story titled "Maoist", based on which *Jallikattu* is scripted. The film retains the characterization of Paul from the short story and he makes his first

appearance in the film as he collects cow's urine in an earthen pot, while his land overgrown with medicinal herbs, revealing his faith in traditional medicine, forms the mise-en-scene. He empathizes with the escaped buffalo and reproaches the mob for chasing it. His acts provide a burlesque of purity rituals. Although he objects to the offensive words uttered by the mob for the fear of pollution, when the mob tramples over his vegetation, he starts yelling at them, hurling abuse, raising concerns about the celebrated *sattvik* identity. Another mask that gets unveiled in the carnival space of *Jallikattu* is that of the upper caste Hindu characters who, in spite of their urge to observe ritual purity, find it difficult to leave behind the non-vegetarian culinary tradition of the family. Although the way Antony delivers beef parcels to various spaces (including the church and the toddy shop) suggests habituality, he is treated with indifference at this Hindu household. On seeing the arrival of Antony, the man of the household openly expresses his hostility by refusing to receive the parcel from him.

Instead, he directs Antony to the back of the house to drop off the parcel of beef. Once Antony leaves, the same character asks a female member of the house (Subhadra) to cook the meat with coconut milk. The man deliberately abstains from uttering the word 'beef', choosing instead to refer to it by impersonal pronouns, as if the word itself carried an element of pollution. He speaks in the Valluvanadan dialect of Malayalam which is typically associated with upper caste Hindus in Northern Kerala and has been used in Malayalam films as a feudal/caste fetish. While Paul's dialect parodies the longstanding tradition of this dialect in Malayalam films, it establishes his difference from the beef-eating minority communities, particularly the Christian community of the region for whom beef is an inevitable part of feasts and Sunday meals. As Tanya Abraham notes, meat, particularly beef, has become a Sunday must for Christians in Kerala (33). Lathika George also stresses this Syrian Christian obsession with meat,

particularly beef. She claims that in traditional Syrian Christian homes, meat is served for every meal; leftover meat dishes are served even for breakfast (105). Fetishes of upper caste identity such as the *thulasithara*¹² form the mise-en-scene framing Antony and the packet of beef that he carries. The upper caste house is conceived as a space of ritual purity and is depicted as being vulnerable to pollution from outside.

Notable Assertions in Passing

Unlike *Jallikattu* and *Angamali Diaries*, that closely engage with the politics of non-vegetarianism chiefly by foregrounding its everydayness, some of the post-2015 Malayalam films devote only specific moments to discuss the same. This is at times achieved through aural signifiers as in *Godha* (Dir. Basil Joseph), *Varane Avashyamundu* (Dir. Anoop Sathyan), and *Pachuvum Athbutha Vilakkum* (Dir. Akhil Sathyan). Asserting one's choice of food, notably those othered in the national context, like beef, becomes even more subversive when such filmic moments are set in places where its consumption is punishable. *Godha* for instance, in a brief comic interlude, takes us to the social tensions surrounding anti-cow slaughter laws in Punjab. In a popular scene in the film, the protagonist Anjaneya Das, a student from Kerala, details the preparation of beef roast to his Tamil friend, Pandi. As Das' detailing, that begins with the dicing of the meat and goes on to the particulars of the ingredients and the preparation method, leaves his friend drooling, they both set out in search of *porotta* (a layered bread made with all-purpose flour, and popular in Kerala, Tamil Nadu etc.) and beef. In the process, Pandi gets beaten up by a group of cow vigilante men, a parody of mob lynching and violence inflicted by such vigilantes in various parts of the country, their indignation subverted to a comic motif. The tension, built through humour in this scene, gets a comic release as a poster of *Gau Raksha Dal* gets revealed from the point

of view of Das and he realises that the place was under the control of cow vigilantes. Such carnivalesque spaces created through parody, laughter and subversion can also be found in, *Pachuvum Athbutha Vilakkum*, *Hridayam* (Dir. Vineeth Sreenivasan) and *Varane Avashyamundu*. As the protagonist Prakashan (Pachu) in *Pachuvum Athbutha Vilakkum* gets invited to a Malayali Ayurvedic doctor's house, he confirms with her if beef will be served for dinner. In this scene set in Mumbai, the hostess hushes him in a light-hearted manner at the mention of 'beef'. The scene makes claims that such dinner get-togethers with beef dishes as the speciality happen regularly among this Mumbai-based Malayali community. A scene in *Hridayam* features the lead characters Arun and Nithya eating beef and bun porotta in a restaurant in Madurai. An old woman is shown to waft incense in the restaurant and over the customers' faces before they are served porotta and beef curry. A popular Telugu devotional song *Nagumomu* by Thyagaraja (1767-1847), a famous Carnatic musician, altered in pace and arrangements to fit in the romantic context, is played in the background as Arun invites Nithya to have porotta and beef. It is significant that the romantic mood set through the devotional song and the backdrop of the sea climaxes with the couple relishing porotta and beef as the celebratory food at the restaurant. The scene was singled out as a mockery of the Hindu customs by placing the ritually impure beef curry in an atmosphere of ritual purity suggested by the song in the background, and the burning of incense. The scene led to discord on Twitter, largely targeted against the state of Kerala.¹³ A scene in *Varane Avashyamundu* features Bibeesh, a native of Kerala briefly settled in Chennai, being restrained by his landlady from cooking non-vegetarian food as she fears that it can stink up the whole apartment block. Later, Bibeesh gets some dry prawns from his neighbour Neena and casually remarks that more than food cravings, it is the landlady's dietary restrictions that tempt him to prepare a prawn chutney. Such instances in

contemporary Malayalam films depict the consumption of non-vegetarian dishes, specifically beef, as a carnivalesque ritual involving laughter, subversive humour, playfulness, and fearlessness by setting it in a (non-Kerala) space that deems it transgressive. In the scene from *Godha* mentioned earlier, as Pandi drools over Das' evocative description of the beef roast, the camera captures his "ever unfinished, ever creating" (Bakhtin 26) grotesque body from an over-the-shoulder shot. The camera here assumes the gaze of a fellow diner in the restaurant, thereby furthering the grotesqueness of his body, an element that contributes to carnivalesque. Here, Pandi wilfully dismisses the etiquettes of a dining space and the entire conversation regarding beef goes against the existing order of the space, the official, and societal norms, as in a carnival. Laughter invoked here, which Bakhtin identifies as a distinguishing feature of the grotesque manifestations (38), has played a constructive role in popularising the scene.



Figure 4. An over-the-shoulder shot from *Godha* showing the character Pandi facing Das and drooling over his vivid description of beef roast.

As in *Godha*, humour in the aforementioned scenes from *Pachuvum Athbutha Vilakkum* and *Varane Avashyamundu* engage with the structures of power and the hegemony of vegetarianism in a subversive manner. The convenient setting of these scenes in a space outside Kerala adds an element of audacity to these exploits that

“celebrate temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (Bakhtin 10), thereby emphasising their carnivalesque nature. Setting these scenes in states where beef is not just taboo, but a reason for several lynching incidents and other forms of violence and othering, showcases the radical nature of the carnivalesque spirit that gets embodied in the cinematic imagination.

Despite the popularity of beef in Kerala, the *tamasik gunas* (traits like negativity, lethargy, and sleep as per Ayurveda) associated with beef and the fear of getting polluted prevent many upper caste Hindus from cooking meat in their houses. Aspiration towards vegetarianism, as an allegedly purer and spiritually superior dietary habit, among the Hindu religious groups in Kerala can be traced to various socio-religious reform movements within the state that flourished during the pre-independence period. For instance, the spiritual and social reformer Sree Narayana Guru, known for his contributions to the renaissance in Kerala, championed vegetarianism and teetotalism in his attempts to sanskritize the Ezhavas, a backward caste community. Thus, while it is acceptable for many upper caste Hindus to have meat at restaurants or public food spaces, cooking and eating meat, particularly beef, inside the domestic space of the kitchen is still taboo. This ambivalent approach towards non-vegetarian food, especially beef, gets ridiculed in *The Great Indian Kitchen* (Dir. Jeo Baby). Set in a traditional Nair household in present-day Kerala, the film throws light on the role of religion in promoting gender roles. In the film, when the newlywed couple attends a dinner at a relative’s house, they are served *kappa biriyani* (a mixture of beef and cassava, a popular dish in many parts of Kerala). As the protagonist’s husband, a staunch observer of ritual purity, seems perturbed at the mention of beef, the hostess reassures him that it was not cooked at home. Here, the paradoxical conception of the profane beef and the sacred cow extends to the food spaces, making the domestic

kitchen a space of ritual purity and the dining area a liminal zone of indulgence in the otherwise forbidden beef.



Figure 5. A screen grab from *The Great Indian Kitchen*. The newlywed couple and two male members of the family of the host are sitting across the dining table while the hostess is serving them food, her daughter standing beside her.

These filmic instances substantiate Kancha Ilaiah's argument that unlike the Dalitbahujan woman, for the caste Hindu woman who is concerned about maintaining the purity of the kitchen, the process of cooking is pervaded by thoughts about religion and God (26). The films, thus, serve as a critique of the hypocritical manner in which concerns regarding pollution and purity continue to determine upper caste Malayali lives.

Conclusion

Kerala has a history of various European Christian missions, the left movement and several social reform movements, owing to which caste practices in the state have become less noticeable, and are often dismissed in public discourse. This could be the

reason why even while the Tamil film industry has been engaging with caste in a more direct manner in the recent decades, Malayalam films resort to an allusive discussion on caste at most. Thus, the Malayalam films discussed in the paper engage with the discourse on vegetarianism and its glorification in a suggestive and subtle manner by representing, and hence normalising non-vegetarian dietary habits. Culinary narratives in these films can be seen as a mechanism of reappropriation of the subaltern dietary traditions, which in turn form a counter narrative to the totalizing vegetarianism of culinary nationalism in India. Carnavalesque images in these films contest the hegemony of vegetarianism and reverse food-based hierarchies chiefly by incorporating subversive humour, laughter, and parody, and foregrounding the body and its corporeality. Carnival spaces assimilate the celebratory and fearless spirit of the carnival, which in the case of Malayalam films, is facilitated by the exceptional socio-political climate of the state. The rise in the popularity of OTT platforms since the Covid-19 pandemic have enabled Malayalam films to have a wider audience, transcending regional and language boundaries. Thus, even with their largely indirect ways of engaging with caste and offering social criticism, these films have the potential to influence public opinion across the nation.

Notes

- ¹ The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is an Indian political party that has traditionally taken right wing Hindu positions. Since 1996, when it first came to power at the centre in India, it has become the key player in the one of the strongest political fronts, the *National Democratic Alliance*.
- ² Uttar Pradesh is one of the Indian states that have implemented stricter regulations concerning cattle slaughter and meat sales. On 28 September 2015, a statement was made by a temple in Bisada village, Uttar Pradesh, alleging an incidence of cow slaughter and consumption of its meat. The announcement instigated a mob, triggering a violent attack on Muhammad Akhlaq and his son Danish, accusing them of possessing and consuming beef in their residence. Although Danish survived with serious injuries, Akhlaq succumbed to the mob's assault. The tragedy compelled Akhlaq's family members to evacuate the village. For more details see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34409354>
- ³ In the 2006 *Sukoon* Festival (annual cultural festival of the University of Hyderabad), the Dalit Students' Union of the University set up a beef stall even after being opposed by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyaarthi Parishad (ABVP), a right-wing student organisation. Further, in 2012 a Beef Festival was held by Dalit students in Osmania University, Hyderabad. In 2012, The New Materialists (TNM), a student organisation based in the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, attempted to organise a beef festival which was opposed by right-wing organisations. The event did not materialise as the Delhi High Court intervened on the matter.
- ⁴ According to Ayurveda, *trigunas* refer to one's inborn qualities that control the mind and health. The three qualities are *sattvik*, *rajasik* and *tamasik*; *sattvik* refers to positive attitude, happiness, spiritual connection etc.; *rajasik* refers to passion; *tamasik* refers to negative thoughts, lethargy, sleep etc.
- ⁵ For more details on this, see <https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/regional-cinema/story/explained-nayantharas-annapoorani-controversy-and-why-netflix-is-under-fire-2487431-2024-01-11>
- ⁶ Article 48 of the Constitution of India that deals with agriculture and animal husbandry provides provision for legislations concerning cattle slaughter. As article 48 comes under Directive Principles of State Policy, states are given the power to decide upon the matter. Consequently legal restrictions on cattle slaughter vary across states.
- ⁷ For more details, see <https://thewire.in/rights/kerala-samajam-frankfurt-beef-germany>
- ⁸ See the population census of 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/32-kerala.html>.
- ⁹ Left Democratic Front (LDF) and United Democratic Front (UDF) are the two major political alliances in Kerala, usually taking turns in forming the government of Kerala. LDF is a coalition of left-wing political parties constituted by member parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Communist Party of India, Kerala Congress (M), Janatha Dal (Secular), Nationalist Congress Party etc. On the other hand, the major member parties of UDF are the Indian National Congress and the Indian Union Muslim League.
- ¹⁰ In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) fronted by BJP secured 12.93% of the total votes in Kerala.

- ¹¹ Talking about the functioning of caste hierarchy within the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, C. J. Fuller argues that as opposed to Hinduism, the rules concerning pollution/purity function only minimally among the Christian community (Fuller, 1976, p. 68). In fact, compared to Christians and Muslims, the observance of bodily purity is higher among the Hindu religious community. Quoting from Mandelbaum, Fuller argues that the ‘ritual criteria’ among Christians and Muslims are less compelling in comparison with that among Hindus (Fuller, 1976, p. 68).
- ¹² Among the Hindus of India, *thulasi* (Holy Basil) is seen as a sacred plant. In the front yards of the houses of upper caste Hindus in Kerala, a raised stone platform is usually constructed to plant the basil. This stone platform called *thulasithara* is a space of veneration.
- ¹³ For more details on this, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuMjZmLVx-E>

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