Where do Minority Pasts Lie in the Modern City? Exploring Articulations of Conflict in Urban Spaces

DIKSHA DHAR

On September 28, 2015, a Muslim man in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh was lynched to death by a mob of Hindu fanatics under the suspicion that he had consumed beef. In India, beef has grown as an indicator of hard-line Hindu forces since colonial times, and has consequently been at the core of innumerable communal tension. Earlier in the year, the Maharashtra Animal Preservation Act (MAPA) of 1976 was amended with stricter guidelines to prohibit and criminalize the possession and consumption of beef. Since Independence, the Animal Preservation Act has been applied variedly by different states. In light of the new amendments to the MAPA and the mob lynching in Dadri, a nationwide beef ban seems to be imminent.

With the news of the lynching in Dadri broadcasted across various news outlets and social media across the country, there is a belated recognition of what such legislation may imply. This suspicion around cow meat throws light on the status of everyday objects that inhabit the social present. With the presence of objects now, not limited referentially by economic value alone, the historical present appears checkered with *other* conventions and pasts. In this case, the minority cultural pasts of Muslims and Dalits, perhaps incongruous to the present landscape of the nation, become known. Dalits across the country consume beef. Beef is also a part of the staple diet in the North Eastern states of India. For Kerala and Tamil Nadu too, this is a common food. However the endorsement of a beef ban by the hardline Hindu register implicates that beef is consumed exclusively by Muslims. Therefore the current dominant ideology views the community as a possible threat to the present nationhood.

For NGOs, human rights activists, Dalits and Minority Rights

organizations, public and academic intellectuals, writers, metropolitan youth, and some film actors, the event at Dadri was a growing sign of religious intolerance in India. They came out expressing their rage at the event through protests and posts on social networking sites.[1] There was no denying the fact that this act of religious intolerance was symptomatic of a communal discord, older than the nation itself. The response as secular beings however, was a much more difficult position to articulate. While some saw the lynching as a violation of personal and individual rights, others saw it as an act of violence that merely went out of control. After all, according to the early reports of the event, the victim, Md. Akhlaq had consumed beef—this is a punishable offence according to the Animal Preservation Act which has been already implemented in a few states of India.

The nature and articulation of the event therefore varied among different publics. The multitude of voices can be roughly categorized under two groups—the first was manifest among secular civil society intellectuals and left leaning groups, who glossed over the cultural implications of beef and mob lynching, and focused more on general manifestations of conflict. Under the banner, 'ones right to one's food,' the *death* of an *individual* caused in response to the *private* act of *eating* becomes the ground for defining intolerance. Built on notions of the public and private lives of nationhood, an act of violence that resulted in the disruption of the *public space* in response to a *private act* of eating becomes highly condemnable.

The second voice comprised of religious groups for whom the cultural implications of beef were definite and perhaps the only thing that mattered. A brief look into the history of the Animal Preservation Bill in India shows how cow preservation has been a prolonged subject of debate since Independence.[2] There was a strong bid to include a provision to ban cow slaughter in the Fundamental Rights in India. It was later included as the 48th Directive Principle under the counsel of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, then Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution. Both Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi opposed a

call for a nationwide ban on cow slaughter stating that they opposed laws that were derived from religion. Nehru once threatened to resign from office during a vote for the nationwide ban.[3] On the other hand, Gandhi said, "I have been long pledged to serve the cow but how can my religion also be the religion of the rest of the Indians? It will mean coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus."[4]

Yet, the ban on cow slaughter, which we see tempered by communal flavour from the onset, has always been demanded as a right of all the citizens of India. Figure 2 shows a pamphlet, from 1893, protesting against cow slaughter. A meat eater is shown as a demon with a sword, with a man telling him, "Don't kill the cow. It is a life source for all."[5] The pamphlet was interpreted by Muslims as representing the Hindu attitude against them during the British Raj. However, the attitude has continued till the present. "For myself, I cannot understand why, in a Hindu majority country like India, where rightly or wrongly, there is such a strong feeling about cow-slaughter, there cannot be a legal ban," opined Jay Prakash Narayan, member of the Janata Party.[6] According to the hard-line Hindu forces, an affinity towards consuming beef endangered their religious worldview that simultaneously dominated their conception of national space. The lynchers had assumed themselves in the role of protectors of a religio-national order, from which they deemed adulterations such as acts of beef eating to be severely reprimanded.

The incapacities of both the voices to articulate and represent the event, becomes evident soon. A few days after the lynching in Dadri, Kolkata based NGO, *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti* (Language and Awareness Forum) called for a protest on the streets of Kolkata. To express solidarity to beefeaters across the nation, the *Samiti* invited people to consume beef on the streets of the city. Other people who had till then supported the opposition to the beef ban sat up in vexation. They still expressed their solidarity to the cause but severely criticized the method *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti* chose in doing so.

"*Eta natok hoche* (This is all drama)", was a general vibe around

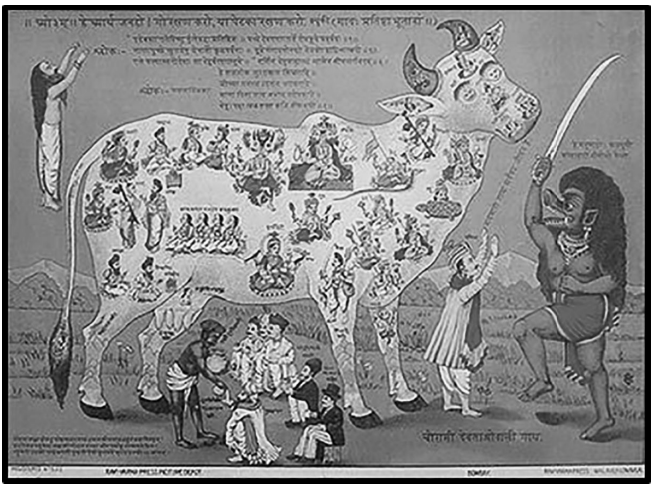

Figure 1.1: Pamphlet against Cow Slaughter in India from 189377

the event. "For those who called in the media today and ate beef at Rajabazaar to prove that they are secular; now, I request them to eat pork at the same place and to eat beef at Kalighat. Then we'll see," challenged Subir Paul on Facebook.[8] Rajabazaar and Kalighat refer to two places in Kolkata. While Rajabazaar is an area dominated by Muslims, Kalighat gathers its significance from its landmark Kali temple for the Hindus. Both of them work as signifiers of religious public in the above statement. Another commented, "Yes, I support the call for democratic rights but this performance in the name of secularism is just to ensure a Muslim voter bank."[9] This post and comment stands indicative of the dominant voice on Facebook. We realize that even for secular groups that barely acknowledged the cultural implications of beef; the symbolic act of consuming beef causes panic. Hard-line Hindu forces in trying to regulate the appearance of beef in the public domain end up acknowledging its presence as a threat.

The *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti's* protest was accused of making the city prone to communal violence. For civil society intellectuals, it had been easy until then to relegate the primitive act of mob lynching

caused by the age-old controversial category of beef as a national anomaly. After all, the lynching had occurred outside the physical boundary of the city, in the small towns and villages. Such spaces were still inhabited by traditional habits and conventions. Their publics then suffered incapacity to understand and abide by the modern and democratic ways of the world. The city space was modern and beyond the primitive entrapments of religion and thus deemed secular. The rightful citizen inhabited the city where they were educated in the ways of modern public sphere and hence did not fall into the trap of such primitive modes of violence.

However, when the *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti* conducted the beef-eating spectacle on the streets of Kolkata, it misfired. Despite being a symbolic act, the actions of the *Samiti* met with a lot of criticism. In expressing their solidarity to beef eaters they set in motion a chain of events whose reference was predefined and could not be undone with fresh intentions. Under 'ones right to one's food', beef eaters were put on the same pedestal as mutton or chicken eaters, which squarely undercut the implications of beef eating as something against the nation. This took the secular society by surprise since it shifted the focus of the conflict at Dadri from the mode of conflict to the object that triggered it, namely beef. In providing beef with the same visibility as poultry and other meat, the *Bhasha O Chetona Samiti's* protest unknowingly revealed that beef, after all could never been seen as merely a food product within the national discourse. Even without the assertion of minority publics, the cultural referent of beef does not go un-invoked. Other publics sweep in, to recognize its cultural implications and networks with minority publics and its consequent threat at their religious order and coerce it back to invisibility.

In Dadri, the public was disturbed by the personal choice of a Muslim man consuming beef in the confines of his private space. The larger disruption of the public domain occurs with the instinctual response to the act of lynching. According to the mob, the consumption of beef though personal, is referential of a particular

community's habits, and thus has to be criticized. As opposed to this, in Kolkata, a symbolic act of consuming beef by a group of people on the crossroads of the city is indicted to be a threat to communal harmony. In both cases, disruption seems to be connected to ideas of adulteration of the religio-national domain. The responses to both the events pit spaces such as Dadri and Kolkata, despite their differences, on the same planes. Both these acts one, private and mundane, the other, symbolic and public, pose equivalent threats of disruption in the national space. The event at Kolkata now appears, not just as a response to the event at Dadri, but also an extension of it.

Perhaps the only difference between the geographical sites of the city and town revolve around the forms of reprimand they receive. In Dadri, on the one hand, a mob of Hindu fanatics assembled physically and assumed authority to lynch a Muslim man to death in order to tame what they perceived as an attempt at adulteration of their space. In Kolkata, on the other hand, a group of people mobilized themselves through social media, to criticize *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti's* symbolic act of consuming beef at the crossroads of the city. In these instances, secularism appears as a matter of regulating private acts and objects in the public domain, both physical and virtual, rather than trying to comprehend why they might be a threat to the present understanding of national consciousness.

The workings of the national public sphere to demarcate and delimit articulation and meaning in the everyday is substantiated by another instance. On the 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda, Kolkata saw a huge state sponsored celebration. Popular Bengali actor Dev played the role of the Hindu monk, Swami Vivekananda. The Salt Lake stadium was decked up to host a two-hour event that included a performance choreographed by the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee herself.[10] This event too received the same response "eta natok hochche." Only this time the tone was that of resentment on the lack of sophistication of the event. Actor Dev, popular for his street side roles, was ridiculed for having tried to socially escalate up the

monk's shoes through the performance. The mockery emerged from the fact that this was perceived as tradition being dragged down to the popular and thus culturally low. However, nowhere was this natok (theatricality) resented on religious lines. While the act of beef eating on the streets of the city was seen as a publicity stunt for garnering Muslim votes and a threat to communal harmony, the celebration of Hindu monk, received a backlash for being, what people claimed, an improper depiction of the Hindu monk himself.

Objects like beef, places like Rajabazaar and Kalighat, actions like beef consumption and lynching, and people such as Vivekananda, all seem to occupy multiple registers of visibility in the everyday. Metonymic to a stratified past, visibility becomes an important vector for unravelling their (the past) work in the historical present. A study of all forms of visual display, assertion in the case of state sponsored celebrations of Swami Vivekananda and denial in case of communal violence suggested by mob lynching, becomes imperative. This throws light on religious, political, and economic networks as they weave in the everyday social fabric of the nation. While the referents range from spaces, people, actions and things, their nature is not always limited to the material domain alone. A visual corpus manifests itself at work, since these objects primarily defined by the nature of their visuality in the public domain and likewise carry within them a certain currency and capital, garnered through everyday usage and exchange.

Reiteration and contexts of reiteration play a significant role in the assigning of referents and timelines they inhabit. Due to the post-colonial context, the visual corpus is both historical and performative in nature. The historical nature of the visual corpus warrants a dual presence in the public sphere. The historical nature of the visual corpus and its limitations become evident in the discussions of Partha Chatterjee and MSS Pandian around the conceptualization of national space during the struggle for Independence. Both Chatterjee and Pandian are concerned with the ideological sieve that the emergent nationalism formulated to share political agency around social issues

of the time.

In his article, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question,* Partha Chatterjee suspects the sudden disappearance of women's issues from public debate towards the close of the nineteenth century as a possible compromise struck within the nationalist ideology.[11] The emergent politics of nationalism of the time, "[glorified] India's past and tended to defend everything traditional."[12] The national elites were suspicious of the penetration of western ideals of modernism in matters of their everyday rituals and lifestyle. The creation of a national identity by limiting the purview of the West and asserting certain aspects of the private as the non-negotiable domain of the nation was then deemed fit for political survival. To accommodate the two contrary states of affairs, a spatial divide was attempted in the new national identity, the 'material' and the 'spiritual,' which manifested also as the 'inner' and 'outer' or the 'home' and the 'world' domain of the national space.

The 'material' sphere encompassed the domain of the science, technology, rational forms of economic organization and modern methods of statecraft where the superiority of the West had to be acknowledged to climb up the global ladder. Women's issues found themselves pushed into the 'spiritual' domain since these were considered to be at the core of national culture. With this rationalization at work, the new identity of the nation orchestrated the qualities of the west while retaining the distinctive identity in the 'spiritual' sphere. MSS Pandian accepts Chatterjee's formulation but extends it to show that this compromise, on which a postcolonial nation's image is made, is in conflict with the subaltern issues and concerns within the subcontinent. If Chatterjee concentrates on the colonial conditions that resulted in such a spatial divide in the nation, Pandian's argument centres around the implications of the split on the numerous subaltern publics residing in the nation.[13]

In relegating the religious sphere to the spiritual and inner domain of nation, a dual purpose is achieved. Not only is religion barred from public debate, it is also upheld as the inner essence of national

identity. First, subsumed as tradition, the religious sphere is no longer in discussion with modern methods of enquiry. Second, any attempt to do so is taken as an attempt to hurt the inner sanctum and consequently, the national sentiments of the people. Evidently, the dominant religious identity asserts itself as national identity. Wielded by national identity, the new public domain then not only silences subaltern issues but also subsumes subaltern conflict in symptomatic violence and aberration in the public sphere as well. This also estranges the religious conflict from its immediate context and appropriates it among subaltern groups such as linguistic, religious, caste and gender minorities, as anomalies of violence within the national territory.

A recognition of material referents then become imperative to the understanding of various networks carpeted under the national public sphere. If we go back to our discussion of the Dadri and Kolkata incidents, the emergence of a third group of people unable to fit in either registers of articulation and representation helps our present context. Comprised of a number of minority rights and people's organizations recognized the implications of beef as a threat to Hinduism and the nation. It becomes significant, to throw light on how the criminalization of certain habits, by law and religious fanaticism, abated the nature of violence implicated in mob lynching at Dadri. While the secular register censors the cultural implication of beef as irrelevant to the discourse, the hard-line Hindu register appropriates Hinduism as a national identity. The reference of beef within the food cultures of Dalits and Muslims across the country is completely disposed of.

The mechanisms of censorship and appropriation of the minority register becomes clear through limits in articulation. A few days after the present protest, *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti* held a food festival where people were invited to consume pork/beef/chicken/vegetarian food as an assertion of one's right to food he/she chooses. The aspect of food representing centuries of traditions and *vis-a-vis* other marginal publics at the periphery stepped into the background to make way for liberal democratic values of individual choice. It

is nevertheless necessary to note, that a moment of retrospection (and retrieval) was possible among a certain stratum of public. The ambit of a food festival (arguably another kind of performance) also regulates the nature of public space. Not only is the public regulated and thus limited to urban educated elite (who are perceived to have had a sophisticated, sensitive and similar critical retrospection and thus modern reception of the beef ban), the food festival banner also legitimizes a certain privileged freedom of expression. What happens to everyday acts of expression? What becomes important then is to regulate one's choice according to the norms of the place as opposed to the references that they represent. There was no such form of retrieval possible for Md. Akhlaq. The Muslim man had no time to reveal his intentions of the entire act. He had to be immediately lynched. Some publics have a possibility of rearticulating their actions while others are not provided the language or the space.

The articulation of the third register undergoes subsumption and censorship and is rendered invisible in the modern public sphere. To throw light on the various networks carpeted under the modern public sphere, I borrow from J. L. Austin's concept of performatives.[14] In his lectures, *How to do Things with Words,* Austin defines performatives as utterances which do not just describe a given reality but are also operative as actions of the speaker themselves. While the constative nature of language refers to *describing* what the real entails, a performative refers to *actions* that operate through linguistic devices.

Austin's well-known example talks of the common marriage vow, 'I do declare thee man and wife.' The nature of the utterance is performative as it does not describe anything that is happening around, but is indicative of an action that is ensured by language itself. Since performatives are shaped and sustained through conventions of everyday, they become a significant help in mapping social rituals at work in the quotidian present. Further, performatives are also dynamic in nature and thus help towards a synchronic study of the visual corpus as they gather or lose currency through time. For the

present study, performative utterances help approach the gap between articulation and experience when they record rituals in the everyday that are not accounted for in the public domain of the nation.

Performatives look like statements and would be classified as statements, and yet cannot be defined in terms of the dichotomy between true or false. The intention of a statement, therefore, cannot be verified within the domain of language communication and its mechanism. A statement might linguistically represent a particular idea but can be read to imply something completely different. Intention and meaning do not necessarily need to be the same thing. Austin showed that communication is possible irrespective of evidentiary truth. In addition to the necessity for communication to happen, is the intentionality of the subject. This increases the rift between truth and falsity as verifiable objects in everyday language. Following on Austin, John Searle opines that the smallest unit in language communication is not the token of the symbol or word or sentence, but the production of the token in the performance of the speech act that constitutes the basic unit of linguistic. Meanings are then produced neither by positivist statements that are verifiable in nature nor by the mere usage of words, but rather by how these come to occupy meaning in the first place through acts that loom in the grand narrative of society itself.

Rituals, conventions, and performances become significant to the usage of the visual corpus, since they throw light on rituals that have been naturalized as everyday actions. They parade around the everyday as *normal* actions till they encounter contexts where their temporal disparity becomes highlighted. For example, the existence of beef in India is not as paradoxical as the hard-line Hindu groups would want to publicize. India is the second largest exporter of beef and the commodity has always been available for consumption at high-end hotels of the country. However, religious referent of beef is highlighted only when it is pitted in an alien environment: such as in a Hindu dominated neighborhood where Md. Akhlaq stayed and thus was seen as a threat, or at Rajabazaar, the Muslim neighbourhood

where it was assumed safe to plan such a protest. The context of performance really defines the referents at play.

It has been seen that the 'consumption' of beef and 'lynching' signify adulteration and communal violence respectively. Apart from the lynching in Dadri, we have seen how the symbolic act at Kolkata and the Vivekananda celebrations have been accused of being mere performances. Both of them are deemed fake but for separate reasons. The *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti*'s act is said to pander blatantly to Muslim votes. In addition, the actor Dev's performance as Vivekananda is ridiculed since the actor famous for his roadside roles is not seen fit to fill into the monk's imaginary shoes. Even in the first event at Dadri, the act of mob lynching can be read as a performance. It stages itself in the public sphere and flaunts violence in the everyday to citizens as spectators. The three acts show different forms of performance in the everyday, whose imitation deals with the accuracy of their performance. Some acts are deemed fake because the visual corpus seems illicit, as in the case of *Bhasha o Chetana Samiti*. The 'truest' act, of course, becomes the mob lynching itself, which is so true a performance that it dissolves into the everyday an act of instinct without any intention. It is only recognized by the implications of what follows and thus need, in this context to be silenced.

The multiple levels of articulation in the public sphere at work are revealed through an operative visual corpus. This visual corpus is deictic to the context they work in. Further, their operation is manifested visually through the implications they cause in the public sphere. Knowledge of the visual corpus is seen among all registers of the public sphere though its recognition is only acknowledged variedly. Since this is formed historically through various socio-political contexts, a familiarity of the corpus often occupies and sets into motion a bunch of commonly shared practices and beliefs.

A visual corpus makes apparent a ritualistic domain that opens up within the national public sphere. A stricter code of conduct and

adherence to its referent are demanded of the visual corpus. When the adherence is not met, as in the case of Dadri, the result is a disruption of the public domain. The scope of the visual corpus is not geographically limited. Its awareness stretches across the physical reaches of the geographical territory and beyond. The visual corpus also reveals multiple registers of publics at work. A linguistic corpus is limited by print media which, controlled by the hegemonic devices, are saturated by them. Whereas the visual corpus pans through a larger demographic, who put it to use through their actions in the everyday.

The restriction of visibility of certain cultural references in the public sphere causes larger inaccuracies since they concern themselves only with the proper and improper mode of representation. As a postcolonial nation, this is further problematic since unlike the west, the post-colonial condition has warranted a dual existence of referential pasts in the nation. The relegation of religious affairs to the private domain does not help either, as both the religious and the national have structures to coexist within larger social networks. Issues such as communal violence and tension cannot be understood unless these social networks are taken into consideration. In light of these observations, a re-evaluation of the public sphere becomes significant. The historical present seems to be chartered by different registers of circulation and representation. With certain aspects confined to the 'private' domain of the nation, articulations are limited by the secular modern and thus difficult to locate in networks within the national sphere. A contrastive study of the mob lynching in Dadri, the *Bhasha O Chetana Samiti's* protest in Kolkata, and the state sponsored celebration of Vivekananda's birthday reveal that everyday networks overlap with the political and the social domain of the nation. Thus, these public performances are perceived either as assertion of nationalism or possible threat to it. A regulation of these meanings is at work within the public sphere of the nation, granting hyper-visibility to some and invisibility to others.

NOTES

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5 William Mazzarella and Raminder Kaur. *Censorship in South Asia Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2009), 36-38. The pamphlet was redrawn from a sketch by Raja Ravi Varma.
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7 Mazzarella and Kaur, 36-38.
8 Samir Pal Datta's Facebook page, accessed 15 October 2015.
9 Ibid.
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14 J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered At Harvard University In 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1962).