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India tightens meat industry laws amid fierce protests - Secularists vs religious nationalists

Saturday 3 June 2017, by [SAFI Michael](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2017).

Regulations banning most livestock from being sold for slaughter at markets criticised as attack on 'the essence of India'.

India's Hindu nationalist government has announced the tightest restrictions yet on the country's multibillion dollar meat industry, drawing fierce protests from some states amid warnings that millions of jobs could be lost.

"Beef festivals" were held in Kerala state at the weekend and a cow was slaughtered in public as a show of defiance against the regulations, which prohibit most livestock from being sold for slaughter at animal markets.

The high court in another southern state, Tamil Nadu, has suspended the restrictions for four weeks to determine their constitutionality.

Footage also emerged on Monday of what appeared to be a fresh vigilante attack on cattle traders [1], one of a spate of assaults and at least 10 killings of Indians accused of consuming or transporting beef since 2015 [2].

Cows are revered by most Hindus. The prime minister, Narendra Modi, ran for office in 2014 on a platform of banning their slaughter nationally. A number of states have bolstered punishments for crimes against cows since his election, including Gujarat, where killing the animal can earn a life sentence [3].

India's environment ministry announced new restrictions on Friday, banning livestock including cows, buffaloes and camels from being sold for slaughter at animal markets. The rules, which the government says are in the interests of animal welfare, also prohibit selling livestock for entertainment and implement minimum standards for animal housing and transportation.

Animals for consumption can still be purchased privately, including cows in the few states where their slaughter is legal, but industry leaders say about 90% of the trade takes place through animal markets. "That is the traditional workplace for the meat industry," said Fauzan Alavi, a spokesman for the All-India Meat and Livestock Exporters Association.

He said the restrictions could cost a significant percentage of the estimated 2.5m jobs tied directly to the meat industry, most of which are held either by Muslims or the country's discriminated-against Dalit caste. "We are throwing away jobs," he said.

The leather industry, which employs three times as many people, would also be badly affected, but farmers would be worst hit, no longer able to easily sell ageing or unproductive cattle, he said.

India's buffalo-meat export industry is the world's largest, increasing in value by more than seven times since 2007 to about \$4.1bn (£3.2bn) last year.

Alavi acknowledged conditions could be improved in many markets, but said "one has to be realistic". "You cannot suddenly get up and compare them to ones in advanced countries like the US or UK," he said. "[Reaching that level] will take generations."

Though restrictions on beef are in place across much of India, states such as West Bengal, Kerala and in the north-east of the country consider the meat a staple, even among Hindus. Pinarayi Vijayan, the Kerala chief minister, said the regulations were an attack on 'the essence of India' [4].

In a letter to other chief ministers, he said the restrictions "may mark the beginning of a series of similar measures aimed at destroying ... the secular culture of our country".

Rahul Gandhi, a major opposition leader, was forced this week to distance himself from members of his Congress party's youth wing, who protested against the restrictions by slaughtering a cow in public on Saturday evening, and distributing the meat to passersby [5].

Hindus, particularly "higher" castes, have esteemed cows as the embodiment of non-violence since at least 500AD. But the movement to ban their slaughter is usually traced to the late 19th century, when Hindu activists began building a modern political platform out of the array of beliefs and practices that form the religion.

The issue has frequently been a trigger for tension with the country's largest minority group, Muslims, whose religion has no injunction against beef, but efforts to ban the meat also divide Hindu secularists from religious nationalists of the same faith.

Michael Safi in Delhi

P.S.

* The Guardian. Tuesday 30 May 2017 10.41 BST Last modified on Tuesday 30 May 2017 22.00 BST: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/30/india-rocked-by-protests-meat-industry-tighter-laws>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/shocking-video-from-malegaon-shows-attack-on-alleged-cattle-traders-1705282>

[2] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/27/india-cow-protection-spurs-vigilante-violence>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/14/indian-state-government-life-sentence-cow-slaughter>

[4] <https://twitter.com/CMOKerala/status/868094060136992768>

[5] <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2017/may/28/kerala-congress-youth-wing-lands-in-trouble-after-slaughtering-cow-in-public-1610053.html>