

Here's Why Modi Knows India Eats Meat But Speaks of Vegetarianism

Disha Verma 6 mins read

When Narendra Modi attacked Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav recently for [violating the 'strict norm' of vegetarianism](#) during the Ram Navami period, he was directly inciting voters in the northern Hindi belt, and of course, in adjunct areas like Gujarat.

After all, India has a record of communal clashes and riots in the Ram Navami period — from Jamshedpur in 1979 to the series at [Jalgaon, Nalanda, Howrah and Sonipat](#) in 2023. Nothing like one just before the elections.

Modi did not realise, however, that he was actually pushing the envelope too far. Whatever be their socially prescribed or chosen diet, people who are adequately informed or educated are aware that several convincing surveys and Census-based data establish, most conclusively, that approximately [between 65 and 75%](#) of Indians are non-vegetarians — on a daily basis, frequently or occasionally.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty

This is what emerges from the National Sample Survey's 68th round in 2011-12, the National Family Health Survey 4 of 2015-16, the same [Survey's round 5 in 2019-20](#), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' [data of 2014](#), the Registrar General of India's [data of 2018](#), *IndiaSpends'* [findings](#) of 2018 and so on. Incidentally, the director in charge of the last National Family Health Survey was [first placed under suspension](#), obviously for revealing embarrassing results rather too frankly, and then smoked out of his office.

During Modi's 10 years, not a single [Consumer Expenditure Survey](#) result was revealed, and now, as elections were about to be declared, some cherry-picked feel-good statistics (not full reports) have hurriedly been published. Even the limited releases reveal, rather inadvertently, that while [expenditure on milk has gone up by 50%](#) in the last two decades, family expenditure on eggs, fish and meat has actually doubled. This is the first government in 170 years to have shied away from conducting a national general census, lest more uncomfortable facts emerge.

Except for Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat (Madhya Pradesh is 50:50), no other state or Union territory among the total of 36 in India has anywhere near a majority of vegetarians among its population. As many as 97 to 99% of the people of four of the five major southern states are non-vegetarians (the fifth, Karnataka, has around 80%) and the same percentage is seen in the eastern states of Odisha, Bengal and Jharkhand. The northeastern states, Goa, and the region of Kashmir in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir are vigorously non-vegetarian.

We have chosen not to refer to the copious mentions in the Vedas, Upanishads and the epics to highly-desirable non-vegetarian foods and extolling certain meats that are totally taboo now.

All of this is why Tejashwi is not unduly bothered with Modi's provocation, as only 7.5% of people in his state are vegetarian. Of course, the number of those who abstain from non-vegetarian diet goes up during Ram Navami, but not enough to cause an outrage. So, why did Modi and even Rajnath Singh reiterate that non-vegetarianism is a sin during the nine days dedicated to Ram?

The first reason is to encash on the 'Ram Lalla' (the infant Ram) that Modi has installed with so much fanfare in the new (and yet one-third complete) Ram Janambhoomi temple in January.



This idea is to reinforce this aspect by playing on the belief that the deity was born on the ninth day of Ram Navami. It helps ignite hatred against sacrilege, though ['blasphemy' is completely alien to Hinduism](#). It has been a weapon of terror in the hands of the super-orthodox in Islam and Christianity. Ever since Modi arrived, cow vigilantes and stormtroopers have been trying to smuggle this concept into tolerant Hinduism, by altering its basic structure.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi takes part in the consecration ceremony of the Ayodhya Ram Temple. Photo: Screenshot from DD News broadcast.

A 'little' god

There is also a larger theological background to why 'baby Ram' or Ram Lalla is being stressed upon – to complement and buttress the warrior Ram and the dutiful *purushottam*.

After all, history reveals that, for over a millennium, Krishna's immense popularity rested on his infant version of Balagopal or Balakrishna. All cultural evidence testifies this and Bala-Murali remains at the core of the cult even after the *Bhagavat Puran* and Jayadeva's *Geeta Govinda* arrived, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, to sweep the box-office with the Radha-Krishna duo. The Shaivas came up with an equally cherubic baby, chubby Ganesha, who was ever so loveable. In the last three decades, the Advani-VHP-Modi axis [has taken up this 'adorable infant' wave to court](#) – appealing to the quintessential Indic value of *vatsalya* or the unstoppable, gushing affection for the 'little one'.

Ram is Modi's trump card but his continued harping on the theme reveals his insecurity in the Hindi and adjunct belt.

The east, the south, Goa, Kashmir, Punjab and northeast hardly ever observe Ram Navami in spring or during the autumnal Navaratri. What they do to celebrate a few of the nine nights in their own local mode – focusing of the goddess, the Pandavas, music, food and so on – with no reference ever to Ram. There is hardly any vegetarian dietary rigour, as in the north and west.

So, Modi just cannot take any chances, as, with the loss of Karnataka, his footprint will surely be reduced in the south. The east, including Bihar, is dicey and Punjab-Kashmir cannot compensate, even if the BJP tries hard. One cannot be certain about repeating the BJP-Shiv Sena victory in Maharashtra, now that the BJP has tied itself into knots by splitting all parties and thereby raising insatiable appetites, and engendering dissent within dissent. Its only option is to further strengthen its stranglehold over the Hindi belt and its real driving base, Gujarat.

'Outsider'

History tells us that ruthless monarchs and autocrats have invariably catapulted themselves from adjacent outlying regions – to play havoc with the 'core culture of the heartland' – raising it to bizarre heights before crashing, ever so painfully.

Alexander was, after all, a Macedonian who took Greece to its zenith and unsettled everyone, before his comet fizzled out. Napoleon was a rustic, hill-billy Corsican who surfed high on the French empire – before inviting its gruesome destruction. Adolf Hitler, the Austrian 'outsider', was the father of the abominable, genocidal Third German Reich and led it to 'glory' and then to unimaginable devastation.

The 'outlier' from Gujarat desperately needs the Hindi belt for his religion-based gameplan, its large territory and its voting numbers. His own state just does not have what it takes, to hegemonise and that is why he plonked his spear in its epicentre, ancient Kashi. With his stranglehold over all that matters for a whole decade, he has ensured that the BIMARU states remain, and move, backward. All over the world, educational backwardness, patriarchal domination and retrograde religious obscurantism breed fanaticism. These come useful for riots and for polarised voting. The percentage of poor in the population in these states ranges from 16 in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan to a staggering 34 in Bihar. [Encounter-prone UP](#) is closer to Bihar in its massive poverty, despite its [bulldozer raj](#) and merciless terror on minorities. But the Hindi-BIMARU belt accounts for the largest chunk of 199 seats that Modi aims to pocket – to achieve his '400 plus' ambition.

Conversely, poverty rates in the more advanced southern states are remarkably low. It is between 0.5% (Kerala) to a maximum of 6% poor in Andhra-Telangana. The BJP's only 'bastion' in the south is Karnataka, where 7.5% of the population is poor, but these five better-off southern states send only 138 MPs to the Lok Sabha – far less than the north. They seem to be paying for their development and better education, as overwhelming numbers of the north are set to swamp them.

In the coming polls, the eastern states do not appear reliable to the BJP and only Assam looks promising in the Northeast. It has been kept on the boil and in relatively deep poverty, to ensure this. The rest really don't matter.

But Modi has a further trump card – the next delimitation of Lok Sabha seats. He has kept a whopping additional number of 243 empty seats in the new Lok Sabha – over and in addition to the existing 543. Modi must be determined to accommodate a massive number of new parliamentarians, ostensibly from the populous Hindi-belt, to ensure the total dominance of Hindi-Hindu-Hindutva.

This could penalise the southern states where education and gender rights have ensured population control. Relief can only emanate if there is sufficient pressure not to follow the old population formula for seat-delimitation. The southern states and Maharashtra are losing heavily as with higher per capita tax contribution and lesser per capita central spending on them, and the north-south confrontation is aggravating, much too dangerously.

'Hindi'

A very pertinent issue is that the present percentage of 'Hindi-speaking' population of 43.6 is actually a highly inflated figure. While the 1951 census considered Hindi, Bihari and Rajasthani to be different languages, the 1961 census declared them and hitherto-different languages like Chhattisgarhi, Brajbhasha, Baghelkhandi, Bundelkhandi and Awadhi as 'Hindi'. This pushed up the existing 23% of Hindi speakers to 30.39%. Then, the 1971 census unilaterally decided to include 48 other mother-tongues as 'Hindi'. Thus, Bhojpuri, Magahi, Nagpuri or Sadri, Maithili, Khortha, Nepali, Kumaoni, Garhwali, Jaunsari, Gojri, Mewari, Mewati and the whole lot are deemed to be Hindi – crushing their local identities, heritage and further development. The percentage of Hindi-speakers thus shot up from 30.39% in 1961 to 43.63% in 2011.

But, over the years, 39 languages have been demanding independent status as distinct languages under the eighth schedule of the constitution. Most of these, like Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Awadhi, all categories of Pahari, Bundelkhandi, Gondi, Gujjari and Magahi seek total separation from Hindi. The matter is, thus, more complex than what the homogenising juggernaut desires and unless the fault-lines are addressed, we may be heading for strife. Ram Lalla and vegetarianism can sway and distract, but these limitations are what Modi cannot paper over – in his relentless quest to piggy-back on Hindi hegemony.

Jawhar Sircar is a Rajya Sabha MP of Trinamool Congress. He was earlier Secretary, Government of India, and CEO of Prasar Bharati.