



Urban Indian Attitudes Towards Alternative proteins: Opportunities and Barriers Among Hindu and Muslim Consumers

Presented by:

Dr. Tani Khara, Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney

RGS-IBG Annual International Conference, August 2023

I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to the Elders both past and present.



Context

- ❖ India is witnessing a shift from vegetarianism towards diets containing greater amounts of meat (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006).
- ❖ Factors driving demand for meat include rising income levels, urbanisation and exposure to global eating patterns among the middle classes who can afford to consume meat for nutritional, sensory and symbolic reasons.
- ❖ Although studies on meat consumption in India are limited, cultural and religious influences shape how meat is perceived (Khara et al., 2021; Khara & Ruby, 2019).
- ❖ Majority (80%) of Indians identify as Hindu and a significant minority (13%) identify as Muslims (The Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India, 2011). The two groups have their own peculiarities relating to meat and cultural practices.
- ❖ As dietary choices - meat consumption in particular - has a significant impact on resources, encouraging meat-reduction and a move towards more sustainable forms of protein in the world's most populous country is a relevant issue for sustainability.



Objectives & approach

- ❖ The aim of this qualitative exploratory research was to explore the perspectives of urban Indian consumers towards alternative protein sources, with a particular emphasis on Plant-Based Meat Substitutes.
- ❖ The study targeted urban areas in India, where meat consumption and disposable income rates are generally higher compared to rural regions.
- ❖ Additionally, to explore the market potential for plant-based meat products, the study also examined the attitudes and willingness of urban Indian meat suppliers, including both raw meat distributors and meat retailers, to incorporate plant-based meat into their offerings.
- ❖ **Methodology:** In-depth, 45-60 minute face-to-face interviews with Hindu & Muslim meat consumers (N=18) and Muslim meat suppliers (N=15)
- ❖ **Data Collection Period:** December 2020



Research Findings

Contrary to India's vegetarian stereotype, meat is increasingly symbolic of status, modernity, and progression in contemporary urban settings

- ❖ In the evolving landscape of meat consumption in India, a few significant trends emerge from scholarly literature.
- ❖ Ahmad (2014) highlights that **the proliferation of specialised meat shops and the availability of imported meats in upscale restaurants and five-star hotels** are tailored to meet the demands of India's high-income population.
- ❖ Simultaneously, the rise of meat's symbolic capital has resulted in a cultural paradigm shift.
- ❖ Traditional vegetarian practices, once highly regarded, are now often perceived as monotonous, uninspiring, and in some cases, even indicative of lower social status (Staples, 2016).

“We make *dal* [lentils] every day in our house but when we are calling a guest, we cannot make *dal* ... We cannot make a vegetable and serve them ... it can be mutton, or chicken, or fish, or prawns ... if you serve them veg, it looks too low grade, I guess ... I feel then like they would think like, see they cannot afford a meal then why are they inviting us?”

(Muslim meat consumer)





Nonetheless, the consumption of meat is often viewed negatively due to certain enduring Hindu customs

Date

In Hindu homes, meat consumption is generally limited to specific days and often accompanied by feelings of guilt

- ❖ “We have fast days during the week where we don’t eat meat... it’s a religious thing. Different gods have different days” (Hindu meat consumer #1)
- ❖ “You’re killing a living thing and eating it – I try not to think about it” (Hindu meat consumer #2)



Meat is also often marginalised in some Hindu cultures, leading to its segregation from other foods and plant-based eating habits.

- ❖ Prior studies indicate that meat is often separated from vegetarian dishes in India (Ahmad, 2014; Dolphijn, 2006).
- ❖ Additionally, the labelling of meat as 'non-vegetarian' underscores the ethical and social taboos associated with meat consumption in contemporary Indian society (Ahmad, 2014, p. 23).

“My husband won’t take a non-veg lunch to work because he eats with others and you shouldn’t eat meat in front of others who don’t eat it...he doesn’t want to upset his work friends, plus they would think badly of him for eating meat. We eat meat at home only” (Hindu meat consumer)



Conversely, meat holds significant cultural importance for Muslims in India

- ❖ Studies emphasise that the consumption of red meat—specifically beef and buffalo meat—is predominantly high among Muslim consumers in India (Bansal, 2016; Devi, Balachandar, Lee, & Kim, 2014).
- ❖ In alignment with these findings, our qualitative investigation also revealed that individuals engaged in animal handling and meat supply frequently identify as Muslim.
- ❖ Furthermore, numerous respondents within this cohort perceive both their trade and animal consumption as critical components of their identity, particularly within the context of a Hindu-majority India.
- ❖ These aspects are elaborated upon in subsequent sections of this presentation.





Findings: Attitudes Toward Plant-Based Meat Alternatives

**When initially presented
with the concept,
consumers expressed
scepticism towards the
concept**

- ❖ “How can it be? It’s not possible!
(Hindu meat consumer)



On the other hand, urban India's desire for novelty welcomed the emerging concept of plant-based meat

- ❖ “I’ve never heard of such a thing...it sounds really cool, I will try it!” (Hindu meat consumer)
- ❖ “Why not? I’ll definitely try it. We try new things. People are experimental in Mumbai because there’s so many offerings” (Muslim meat consumer)



For Hindu consumers, in particular, plant-based meat alleviates the ethical dilemmas tied to meat consumption

- ❖ “Wow! No animal killing, I can eat it without any guilt” (Hindu meat consumer #1)
- ❖ “The people in my households fast on Tuesdays and Saturdays. On those days we aren’t allowed to cook or eat meat at home. This could be a good option” (Hindu meat consumer #2)





Barriers/ concerns in relation to plant-based meat alternatives

Date

Numerous consumers cited health worries about plant-based meat in a market marred by food scandals

- ❖ “The first thing that comes to mind is what is really in it? What sort of chemicals and processing has it gone into it to make it look and taste like meat? When we mess with nature, we get sick. This product won’t make people sick will it? (Hindu meat consumer #1)
- ❖ “This product reminds me of those plastic rice scandals and other scandals relating to adulterated food. You know when something is mixed with something else to make it look like food?” (Muslim meat consumer #2)



In terms of price, consumers anticipated plant-based meat to be more affordable than traditional meat

- ❖ “Can artificial gold be the same price as real gold? I feel the same goes with this product” (Muslim meat consumer)
- ❖ “Vegetables are cheaper than meat so if this is a vegetarian product, it should be cheaper than meat!” (Hindu meat consumer)



Some Hindu consumers raised trust concerns about plant-based meat due to cultural sensitivities surrounding meat consumption

- ❖ “I wouldn’t trust the meat seller with this – is he mixing it with meat or giving me the wrong thing? Or I might make a mistake on a holy day and go against my family rules...it still concerns me” (Hindu meat consumer)



Muslim consumers were more likely to question compatibility of plant-based meat with beloved meat-centric recipes

- ❖ “How will this fit with our favourite mutton dishes...biryani, rogan josh, kebabs?” (Muslim meat consumer #1)
- ❖ “A lot of people like mutton with bones...eating mutton with bone offers a different eating experience from boneless meat...others like the marrow in the bones...some like cooking with bones. I’m not sure if this is going to be like mutton exactly” (Muslim meat consumer #2)



Muslim participants – both consumers and suppliers – noted the traditional significance of meat and hence questioned fit of plant-based alternatives

- ❖ “Buying goat especially during Bakri-Eid is part of our culture. Maybe people will try it, but this won’t replace mutton!” (Muslim meat consumer)
- ❖ “We have been in this business for a long time. My forefathers started this business. We will always continue to sell mutton” (Muslim meat supplier)



Building on from the previous slide, some Muslim meat vendors also feared loss of credibility if they shift toward plant-based alternatives

- ❖ “I sell (real) meat!” (Muslim Meat supplier #1)
- ❖ “My customers have been coming to me for years because they trust me and know they will get quality meat. I’m not sure about offering this new product...and that too a vegetarian one” (Muslim Meat supplier #2)



Conclusion

- ❖ The landscape for Plant-Based Meat (PBM) in India presents a complex interplay of awareness, skepticism, and potential acceptance.
- ❖ During this study, levels of awareness about PBM appeared to be relatively low, and there was a palpable sense of skepticism among participants. Nevertheless, the concept was also welcomed for its novelty and potential health benefits by both Hindu and Muslim respondents.
- ❖ The skepticism toward PBM was multi-faceted, encompassing concerns about taste, health, and past food scandals.
- ❖ Interestingly, both Hindu and Muslim participants shared these general concerns, but exhibited differences in the specifics.
- ❖ Hindu respondents expressed trust issues, primarily due to the product's resemblance to meat, which carries cultural and religious sensitivities.
- ❖ Muslim participants, on the other hand, questioned the alignment of PBM with their traditional meat-eating practices.
- ❖ Given these observations, future research in this area will aim to delve deeper into the nuanced attitudes of these two religious consumer groups toward various forms of PBM.
- ❖ Such an investigation is particularly pertinent for urban India, where rapid socio-cultural changes are affecting food choices and consumption patterns.

References

- ❖ Ahmad, Z. (2014). Delhi's Meatscapes: Cultural Politics of Meat in a Globalizing City. *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*, 3(1), 21–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2277975214520909>

- ❖ Bansal, S. (2016, October 29). 'More Indians eating beef, buffalo meat.' *The Hindu*. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/'More-Indians-eating-beef-buffalo-meat'/article16085248.ece>

- ❖ Devi, S., Balachandar, V., Lee, S., & Kim, I. (2014). An Outline of Meat Consumption in the Indian Population - A Pilot Review. *Korean Journal for Food Science of Animal Resources*, 34(4), 507–515. <https://doi.org/10.5851/kosfa.2014.34.4.507>

- ❖ Dolphijn, R. (2006). Capitalism on a Plate: The Politics of Meat Eating in Bangalore, India. *Gastronomica*, 6(3), 52–59. <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2006.6.3.52>

- ❖ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2006). *Growth and Concentration in India*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. <http://www.fao.org/wairdocs/LEAD/x6170e/x6170e09.htm#TopOfPage>

- ❖ Khara, T., Riedy, C., & Ruby, M. B. (2021). The Evolution of Urban Australian Meat-Eating Practices. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 5, 499. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.624288>

- ❖ Khara, T., & Ruby, M. B. (2019). Meat Eating and the Transition from Plant-Based Diets among Urban Indians. *M/C: A Journal of Media & Culture*, 22(2). <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/1509>

- ❖ Staples, J. (2016). Civilizing Tastes: From Caste to Class in South Indian Foodways. In *Food Consumption in Global Perspective* (pp. 65–86). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137326416_4

- ❖ The Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India. (2011). *Religion*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx