



The place in Barasat where activists stopped trucks and released cattle. *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

With Beef Bans, India Moves To Protect Sacred Cows

Conservative Hindus with ties to Prime Minister Modi's party stop cattle trucks, free the animals

By **JESSE PESTA** and
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KOLKATA—Sitting outside a tiny office beneath a colorful portrait of a bull, members of the Bharatiya Janata Party's Cow Development Cell relive their recent exploits: setting up road blocks, stopping cattle trucks and freeing cows bound for the slaughterhouse.

“We have to do it to save our cow mother,” says Subrata Gupta, head of the state of West Bengal’s branch of the group, an official arm of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s political party.

Across India, the status of the cow—an animal deeply revered in Hinduism—is emerging as a divisive issue. Conservatives emboldened by the rise of Mr. Modi’s BJP, which has Hindu nationalist roots, are seeking stricter limits on beef eating.

The western state of Maharashtra, home to India’s financial capital of Mumbai, this year expanded its ban on cow slaughtering to add bulls and bullocks to the list. The BJP-governed state of Haryana recently imposed stricter punishments to protect the cow.

In March, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh called for a nationwide prohibition on beef, saying: “How can we accept that cows should be slaughtered in this country? We will do our best to put a ban on this, and we will do whatever it takes to build consensus.”

Mr. Modi won broad electoral support with an inclusive message of economic revival in a nation of myriad religions, languages and cultural traditions. But the government has also worked to promote yoga, a practice with roots in Hinduism, as well as Sanskrit, an ancient tongue that is used as Hinduism’s liturgical language.

Some Muslims contend the beef bans and other steps are aimed at them. “The BJP is trying to make Muslims feel like they’re not Indians,” says Siddiqullah Chaudhary of Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind, a national Muslim-rights organization.

It isn’t just Muslims who object. “These religious things are spreading everywhere,” says Anubhav Chakraborty, who is Hindu yet opposes banning beef on the principle that it erodes India’s secular tradition. Earlier this year, Mr. Chakraborty planned a beef-eating event in the West Bengal capital of

Kolkata—dubbed the “yummy protest” in local media—to challenge the bans.

He had to cancel at the last minute in a dispute with his venue, but he says he’ll try again. Similar beef-eating protests have been staged elsewhere. His mother and co-organizer, Ramala Chakraborty, argues that India is too poor not to do something useful with cows that are no longer giving milk or doing productive work. “We will have an empire of cows,” she says.

BJP spokesman Nalin Kohli says that those who complain about efforts to end cow slaughter “should begin by reading the constitution of India.” That document, which guarantees freedom of religion, says the state should modernize agriculture and animal husbandry and take steps for “improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves.”

Still, selling beef is legal in West Bengal and a handful of states, and the country is one of the world’s largest exporters of beef. Laws vary state-by-state, and much of the beef actually comes from buffalo, which isn’t sacred in Hinduism.

Penalties for slaughtering cows vary in states where it is illegal. Gujarat, for instance, sets a maximum seven-year jail term and 50,000-rupee (\$780) fine, whereas in the capital city, Delhi, it’s a maximum five years’ jail and 10,000 rupees.

Cattle smuggling is common across India’s border into Bangladesh, and members of Mr. Gupta’s Cow Development Cell, which has set up “rapid-action groups” to stop cattle trucks despite having no legal authority, say they suspect the animals they liberated were headed there.

The BJP’s Mr. Kohli says the party doesn’t support behaving in a “vigilante manner.”

An hour’s drive south of Kolkata in the village of Champahati, Mr. Gupta met recently with a rapid-action group that a few months earlier had blocked

the road, stopping trucks and freeing 92 head of cattle. “Members of our group surrounded the area,” says group member Anant Mondal.

A senior local police official said he was unaware of the incident.

Mr. Mondal embodies a challenge for the BJP as it tries to appeal to a broad cross-section of Indians. He is also a member of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a hard-line Hindu group associated with, among other things, the 1992 destruction of a historic mosque in Ayodhya, which sparked rioting that killed hundreds and, even today, echoes politically and socially.



Members of India's ruling-party Cow Development Cell in Champahati point out where in the village they stopped cattle trucks and released animals. *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Mr. Mondal expresses a fear of Muslim domination and worries that Muslims are tricking Hindu women into marrying them. “We have to fight,” Mr. Mondal says.

This past January, a larger cattle-truck stoppage took place near the town of Barasat that involved right-wing activists. Several hundred animals were freed. A senior local police official declined to comment on the incident.

Debraj Mitra, 32 years old, said he was one of the participants. For years, Mr. Mitra says, the sight of cattle trucks troubled him. So he finally decided to act. “There is always a first time,” he says. With Mr. Modi in power, “we might get support from the top.”

Recently the Mitra family met with Mr. Gupta, head of the West Bengal cell, on the outskirts of Kolkata. Mr. Mitra’s mother, who is herself a BJP politician, paid Mr. Gupta a compliment, saying he looked younger than his 72 years.

“That is because of cow urine,” Mr. Gupta replied. Some believers hold that drinking small quantities of cow urine brings health benefits; it is a practice shared among several local Cow Development Cell members.

Mr. Gupta described the BJP Cow Development Cell to the younger Mr. Mitra. “We’ve had many operations—one in Bongaon, one in Champahati, and another one in Gangasagar, and many others,” Mr. Gupta said, naming several places around the state.

The two men agreed to keep in touch. “We need an organized movement,” Mr. Mitra said.