



"Let Us Become Human through Beef and Pork": Atheist Humanism and the Aesthetics of Caste

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205

The so-called Cow Protection Movement, its legal manifestation in bans on cow slaughter, and its central significance in the formation and symbolism of religious nationalism and communal violence have a long history in India reaching back to colonial times (van der Veer 1994). Recently, it has sparked renewed public attention due to repeated attacks and violent murders perpetrated by Hindu right-wing "cow protectors" against primarily Muslim and Dalit persons accused of killing cows and consuming or storing beef.¹ Instead of placing the contentious issue of beef consumption into the context of current debates about 'Indian secularism'² and Hindu nationalism, I will approach it in this article from a different—in a sense opposite—perspective: the perspective of explicitly irreligious people who criticise and try to overcome communalism by mobilising a social imaginary or an "aesthetic formation" (Meyer 2009) of atheist humanism. This article explores the complex ways in which transgressive, anti-communalist prandial practices and in particular anti-caste practices relate to embodied sentiments and materialised settings of communal division; it thereby seeks to add another layer to analyses which tend to foreground questions of political and (anti-)religious ideology.

Concretely, I analyse a historical event of public beef and pork consumption which was conducted in 1972 by the Atheist Centre (Nastika Kendram)³, an atheist organisation in Vijayawada (Andhra Pradesh), as part of its larger and still ongoing endeavours to annihilate the caste-system. The slogan for this event was: "Let us become Human through Beef and Pork" (Gora 1972c: 1). I argue that the public ingestion of beef as well as other atheist anti-caste programmes attempt to manufacture social scenarios which afford a specific type of



'publicness'—that is a form of material, spatial, and affective perceptibility—for performing not only transgressions of caste boundaries but also an alternative form of humanist interaction which atheists call "human mingling." This notion, however, does not refer to just any kind of interaction between any kind of human being but to a public atheist practice which occurs within concrete physical and affectively structured spaces at whose social construction it consequently participates. Human mingling produces therefore a very specific form of atheist humanist 'castelessness', where human beings are not—and do not necessarily feel—equal in an abstract or absolute sense; rather, existing hierarchies persist by being transformed into differential agency and distributed sentiments.

The Atheist Centre and the Production of Humanist Publicness

The Atheist Centre is a prominent institution within a larger and diverse movement of allied atheist (nastika), rationalist (hetuvada), and humanist (manavavada) movements in the Telugu speaking regions of South India (for better readability, the word 'atheist' refers in the following to the whole movement). The Centre was founded in 1940 by Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (1902–75) and his wife Saraswathi Gora (1912–2006) in a small village called Mudunuru in Andhra Pradesh (Krishna district) and was shifted to the district capital of Vijayawada in 1947. As is common among atheists, the Gora family has renounced its caste, and Goparaju Ramachandra Rao officially changed his name to Gora in order to remove all associations with his and his family's former Brahmin caste. Besides explicitly anti-religious propagation and a diverse range of social reform projects as well as developmental activism, the Atheist Centre has since its very inception engaged in endeavours to annihilate caste, for example, by conducting inter-caste marriages, organising cosmopolitan dinners, or renaming Dalit settlements. On its website, the Atheist Centre describes itself with the following mission statement: "Atheist Centre is a social change organization striving for eradication of superstitions, inculcating rational, scientific and secular outlook for spreading positive atheism and humanism as a way of life (life-stance)."⁴

Atheists often consider humanism, as a philosophy and the given of a shared humanity, to be the opposite of caste and religious divisions and thus both the foundation and envisioned outcome of atheist activism. Gora's eldest son Lavanam (1930–2015), himself a renowned leader and famous atheist orator, described the relationship between



atheism and humanism very succinctly by defining the former as a "human-centred" as opposed to a "god-centred" approach to life:

Atheism is not mere denial of the existence of god or criticism of religious texts or exposing the superstition; [...] In reality, Atheism aims at building up a new society based on freedom, equality, fraternity and justice. Atheism aims at complete elimination of exploitation in social, economic and all other fields. Atheism destroys the barriers of caste, race and religion and all other inequalities [...]. It turns attention from imaginary god to the reality of social situations and for [sic] the establishment of equality and freedom. (Lavanam n.d.: 22–3)

Atheism is thus seen less as a negative turning away from god(s) than a positive turning towards society as both the real foundation of human life and the object of service, reform, and improvement (cf. Gora 1972d and Gora 1989); in other words, since society is human-made, it can also be unmade and remade. It is against the background of such conceptualisations of atheism as essentially a form of humanist social reconstruction (sanghanirmanam)—rather than merely theological or epistemological criticism of religion—that the annihilation of social divisions based on caste has gained centre stage in atheist activism. In the following, I will look at the notion of humanist social reconstruction through the example of a specific anti-caste programme, namely a "Beef and Pork Friendship Function" organised by the Atheist Centre on its own premises in 1972.

In late June of the same year, and against the larger historical canvas of the third Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, the Atheist Centre started advertising a programme of public beef and pork eating via its own journals, daily newspapers, pamphlets, mouth-to-mouth propaganda, and posters in public spaces. In the July issue of his English monthly called *The Atheist*, Gora announced the details of the programme and described its rationale:

Owing to the antiquity of her civilisation, castes and communities have settled down in India in isolated groups. The isolation was natural in early times when communications were not well developed. But the isolations are not only outmoded in the modern world but are inimical to the evolution of one-humanity. Further the isolations are the cause of the present riots and conflicts that disturb peace and progress. Therefore the following programme is formulated to pull down the isolations and to facilitate free mingling of people. Food habits of caste and communities in India are the material distinctions that keep up isolations. For instance, South Indian Brahmins and Vysyas are strictly vegetarian while



the Vaishnavite community tabus [sic] onions also. Bengali Brahmins eat fish but taboo meat. Hindus, other than Harijans, taboo beef while Muslims taboo pork. At the time of communal riots, a cow and a pig fall as the first victims. For they are slaughtered and their blood and flesh are spilt in the quarter of the opposite community, taking mischievous pleasure in offending their sentiments. Now, this programme breaks the outmoded sentiment and removes the cause of meaningless offence. (Gora 1972a: 1)

He continued with the details of date, time, and venue and then proceeded to describe the intended programme:

So on that day two plates of bits of well-cooked beef and pork will be kept on a table along with plates of cooked rice and baked bread. The size of the bits of beef and pork will not be bigger than one cubic centimetre. The participants are requested to take one bit of pork and one bit of beef and eat them together *openly* with morsels of rice or bread as they like. [...] It is not a dinner or a sumptuous meal. It is an open protest against the antiquated sentiments in food habits that have kept the communities conflictingly apart (ibid.: 1-2, emphasis in original).

Gora furthermore announced his intention to invite the press to the event and, after its completion, to publish a list with the names of all participants. He stressed repeatedly that the function was not designed to offend anybody but, by contrast, to remove the cause of "meaningless offence" once and for all. Because India's official "policy of live and let live each community with its own sentiments" had failed it was time to take public action "in the spirit of opening a new chapter in human relations" (ibid.: 2). Even though readers might feel hesitant because of their revulsion against beef or pork—or meat in general—Gora urged them to participate and stressed the small size of the morsels of meat; these should be considered "bitter pills of medicine" (ibid.), which will heal society's ills of communal violence between castes and religions.

The August issue of *The Atheist* appeared still before the event and opened with an article by Gora, in which he described the unanticipated amount of both positive and negative reactions stirred by his previous announcement: two people had gone on hunger strike next to the Atheist Centre in order to protest the programme and critical handbills and posters had been distributed in its vicinity. Among those objecting to the event were Vishva Hindu Parishad, Arya Samaj, Jeeva Raksha Sangham (an animal welfare organisation), Christian Society for Animals and, on behest of the Shankaracharya of Puri, the Gandhian Sarva Seva Sangh. The latter had requested Gora to declare the function as an "individual programme unconnected with Sarvo-



daya" (Gora 1972b: 1), and the Shankaracharya's followers had threatened to hold a counter-satyagraha unless Gora desisted from his plans.⁵

At the same time, however, there were also a number of positive responses. Within the fold of supporters, Gora (1972c) mentioned a few individuals by name as well as the Indian Secular Society, Indian Atheist Society, Atheists' Congress at Hyderabad, Sama Samaj Nirmana Sadan, and Bheem Patrica. As a sign of support, members and sympathisers of the atheist movement replicated the programme in various towns of Andhra Pradesh as well as neighbouring Tamil Nadu and published the names and number of their participants (Gora 1972b; The Atheist 1972a & 1972b; Kasturi 1972). Eventually, the programme had to be carried out under police protection based on Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Out of a total of 300 attendees, 136 participated actively by ingesting beef and pork during the function.

By looking more closely at the criticisms as reported by Gora as well as his retorts, it is possible to gauge the significance of this programme. Besides arguments for non-violence and against animal cruelty, the main objections were at first sight seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, the Atheist Centre was criticised for blowing the issue of food habits out of proportion; food habits were, after all, merely a matter of custom or individual preference and thus an inadequate subject for a political and social reform programme. On the other hand, the programme was deemed dangerous because it would recklessly and out of sheer pettiness offend and enrage the sentiments of various communities. Gora pointed out the inconsistency of these reactions, because they belittled food habits as insignificant trifle and, at the same time, credited them with inordinate power to provoke violence.

Gora himself, however, seemed to replicate this apparent inconsistency by framing food habits as merely material signs of an obsolete yet still threateningly powerful form of social organisation based on division, isolation, and hierarchy. As the quotes above show, he characterised the sentiments attached to food as "antiquated", "outmoded" and "meaningless." Gora furthermore emphasised the symbolic function of the event by clarifying that "it is not a dinner or a sumptuous meal" (Gora 1972c: 2). Reacting especially to the arguments about non-violence, he stressed that he and his entire family were complete vegetarians: "We don't eat even an egg" (ibid.). The



question remains, then, why critics as well as supporters of the programme construed practices around food simultaneously as trifling symbols and as a source of potent sentiments and violence. After all, what is the actual offence caused by the Beef and Pork Friendship Function? What exactly do atheists want to transgress by breaking religious and caste-based food restrictions?

For Gora, the event was symbolic because its purpose was not at all to break specific food restrictions or change actual dietary habits, but to affect social change by transgressing publicly and tangibly—esculently, as it were—a whole social order based on affectively charged and institutional forms of "sectarianism":

There is only one do and don't which is most important and significant in human affairs. It is 'Do what you say, and say what you do.' This "Do" insists upon the openness of conduct. The corresponding "Don't" is secrecy and sectarianism. [...] Except openness of conduct, the ways of dress and diet should be treated as trifles [sic] and left to individual tastes. [...] Only those dos and don'ts are just and proper which allow humans to mingle with fellow humans with equal respect and opportunity. All other dos and don'ts that prevent a human mingling with another human are wrong, outmoded and inimical to the progress of civilization. (Gora 1972c: 2)

210

As it turns out, we are here not dealing with transgressions of particular prohibitions of beef for Hindus, pork for Muslims, meat for certain castes, fish or onions for others et cetera, but with a transgression of rules as such or, more specifically, rules which obstruct the progress of civilisation towards the telos of a homogeneous social body. What Gora calls "human mingling" or hyphenated "one-humanity" is not the sheer co-presence of unmarked human bodies—of bodies marked as nothing but human—but a specific form of social interaction which is opposed to "sectarianism." The quality of this interaction and with it the Beef and Pork Friendship Function's potential for offence—from the Atheist Centre's perspective, its potential for social transformation—did not reside in the act of ingesting beef and pork as such, but in the specific and concrete form of 'publicness' it created through a performative event and through the mediatisation of that event in newspapers, journals, handbills et cetera:

Some transgress the taboos [sic] in private life for reasons of taste or health. But such private acts do not promote social change. Hence the openness of the function. [...] After all, the programme is in line with the cherished ideal of one-humanity and



should attract all people into its fold ultimately. We invite the press in giving the programme the publicity it deserves and help the cause of resolving conflicts and promoting harmony. (Gora 1972a: 2)

A number of scholars has pointed out the need to 'provincialize' (Chakrabarty 2000) the seemingly universal notions of public and private by going beyond European political philosophy and paying attention to actual politics of space and practices of publicness. Robert Frykenberg (2008), among others, has argued that public spaces in India have traditionally been communal spaces, access to which has been regulated and restricted by "distinctions between things 'pure' and 'impure'" (ibid.: 289)—including human beings (cf. also Viswanath 2014). Other examples from India show how the dichotomy of public/private is being complicated by similar yet not quite congruent dichotomies such as the Tamil *akam/puram* (inner/outer), the Bengali *ghare/baire* (at home/outside), or the Hindi *apna/paraya* (mine/other) (Chakrabarty 1991; Kaviraj 1997; Bate 2010).

The rationale behind the Atheist Centre's Beef and Pork Friendship Function is to create a social scenario in which it is possible to perform a notion of publicness which is characterised by "openness of conduct" and whose opposite is not privacy but "secrecy and sectarianism." In *Positive atheism*, Gora's last book and one of the most concise summaries of his philosophy, he explains not only why privacy is irrelevant for atheist activism but also why sectarianism and, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, also secrecy are in fact public:

Secrecy is different from privacy. Privacy is a personal matter in which others are little interested. [...] Secrecy is an escape from social obligation. It results from a desire for selfish advantage or from a sectarian outlook. Members of a group are honest among themselves, but are often dishonest with others. Casteism, communalism, racism, nationalism and gangsterism are examples of sectarian behaviour. In the context of wider social relations, sectarianism is as dishonest as secrecy. (Gora 1972d: 48–9)

I argue that the goal of the Beef and Pork Friendship Function, and atheist activism more generally, is to contest particular embodied, materialised, and institutional forms of social differentiation based on "secrecy and sectarianism"—whatever the concrete forms, belief-systems, or epistemic claims in which these may manifest (casteism, communalism, racism, nationalism, gangsterism et cetera). As a result, humanism appears here as a form of publicness which refers to the realm of the perceptible, the tangible, the embodied, in short the



aesthetic, and which is therefore not constituted in contradistinction to the private. The goal of atheist activism is to transgress and thereby transform a "community of sentiment" (Appadurai 1990: 93) or an "aesthetic formation" (Meyer 2009)⁶ which produce particular kinds of social distinction crystallising, in the case at hand, around the materiality of food practices and the different interpretations of their entanglements with social formations (caste, religion, nation), bodily reactions (revulsion), ethical values (honesty, selfishness, social obligation), and affective intensities (sentiments). In the second part of the article, I want to focus particularly on the affective dimensions of atheist humanism and its public scenarios of "human mingling", as they are imagined, articulated, and produced in the context of concrete endeavours to annihilate caste.

The Affective Dimension of Atheist Humanism

Although Gora and the critics of his Beef and Pork Friendship Function ultimately agreed on the trivial nature of food habits, they nonetheless credited them with the power to incite intense and potentially harmful sentiments. Irrespective of whether sentiments are seen as outmoded and meaningless or as a justified reaction to a suffered offence, they are what atheists wanted to protest and break, and what their critics wanted to respect and protect. In order to further unpack the affective dimension of the scenarios created through atheist anti-caste, or rather anti-sectarian programmes, it is necessary to have a closer look at the nature of the sentiments evoked through atheist discourses and practices.

At a more abstract level, biographic and autobiographic narratives of my atheist interlocutors in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana construe atheism primarily as a matter of heroism. Their accounts and narratives are full of laudatory phrases extolling individuals for "having the guts" to profess their atheism, which continues to be a very negatively loaded term and may cause social ostracism and opposition from families, caste communities, orthodox authorities, Hindutva forces, or simply society in general. Beyond questions of concrete religious beliefs, cosmologies or ritual compliance, lived atheism, as both a personal way of life and a project of social reconstruction, often appears as a form of emotional work which is grounded in more than a reactive steadfastness in the face of social opposition.

I would like to illustrate this point with another account of "human mingling" narrated by one of my atheist interlocutors called Shariff



Gora. He was born in 1946 into a Muslim family as S. Muhammad Shariff and grew up in Brahmanakotukur, a small village in Kurnool district. Currently, he lives in Hyderabad and is a dedicated activist in many different atheist groups and organisations; among other things, he is a marriage broker for casteless and nonreligious marriages. Since Gora is one of the most famous atheist intellectuals in the region, Shariff Gora had decided to adopt that name as a sign of his public commitment to atheism. The following quote is an excerpt from one of our interviews, where he explains that one of the reasons for choosing his new name were Gora's achievements in the practical realisation of atheism and, in particular, his fight against the caste-system:

This man [Gora], he lived in the untouchable colony. Really, you won't believe. Now, it may be developed, but imagine 60, 70 years back. [...] I am telling you, I used to go to do some work in untouchables' area. I would not go in, deeply inside that. I used to be at the border of that and then I shout: "Balchandra, *ra!*" [B., come here!] I used to shout his name. He used to come like this: "*Em dora?*" [What is it, master?] Because in those days they were treated as very downtrodden people. They should respect upper caste people: "*Ah, em dora, endukoccinaru?*" [What is it, master, why did you come?].

213

Like that he used to say. [...] There was a very filthy atmosphere there: no hygiene, nothing, dirty, dirty water is flowing in between their houses, lots of mosquitoes, dogs, pigs, roaming all around. In such an area, going and living with them, dining with them and giving your daughter—upper caste, this man [Gora]—giving the daughter to such people is no regular thing, now also [it is] a challenge.⁷ Many people cannot do that. Gora's work, he has gone with that: "I am an atheist, *Nenu nastikunni*. God is not there. This religion is man-made. We are all equal people. We are all brothers."

Like that he hugged the untouchable people. That created a very big impact on (untouchable) people. Such a learned man and educated man going into that, such a situation, and making them feel that you are all equal to me. So that type of work how many people are doing it? Even Gandhi had not done it. He only told: "There are no untouchables." [...] But what has he done? [...] But, Gora has done it practically. This type of social injustices he tried to remove.⁸

What differentiates Gora's atheism from other critiques of the caste system or professions of humanism—in this case Gandhi's—is that Gora did not just talk; he "has done it practically." Moreover, the significance of atheist anti-casteism is emerging here first and foremost via the aesthetic environment and affectively charged space where it is



put into practice: the 'topos'—in a literal as well as tropological sense—of the 'filthy untouchable colony'. Shariff Gora's description of Gora's transgression of caste boundaries demonstrates palpably how caste is not only a religiously or customarily sanctioned body of rules but an affectively charged, embodied, and spatially inscribed social institution. Similar to the Beef and Pork Friendship Function, his account evokes a scenario of atheist practice which makes it very clear that the rationale and intended outcome of Gora's efforts is human equality; but this effort occurs neither between abstractly equal people nor within a neutral, presumably 'secular' space.⁹ The concrete spaces and scenarios in which practices of "human mingling" are being performed are not a neutral background or container; they are the merging of physical space, spatial imaginaries, and existing relations of power into a densely structured, spatially and temporally determined, aesthetic formation of atheist humanism.

In Shariff Gora's account, which is a narrative of praise, Gora is an exceptional and indeed heroic figure because he overcomes social constrictions and pressures as well as powerful embodied aversions, as he enters unflinchingly into physical proximity—and even affinal kinship—with the "downtrodden" and "untouchables"; a "challenge" few people are able to master. Gora's heroism is here inversely mirrored in the sentiments of lowliness and submissiveness on the part of the "untouchables" and their deferential and respectful language ("What is it, master?"). The aim of atheist activism is thus not only to generate atheist heroism but also to transform that humility into sentiments of equality, self-assertion, and self-respect. Within a larger discursive framework of atheism, for which Shariff Gora's account is here only one example, this transformation usually remains conditional on the benevolent intervention of atheist activists; their "untouchable" counterparts, by contrast, are frequently represented as lacking any agency to claim or develop *svabhimanam* (self-respect) on their own. In other words, Gora's heroism in his interaction with Dalits—his "human mingling"—is intrinsically bound up with his agency to 'make others' feel equal.

I frequently came across such memories, accounts, or vignettes of atheist transgressions of caste boundaries, which almost unvaryingly replicate this structure of distributed sentiments and agency. Another example is a conversation I had with one of Gora's daughters, Mythrie, who explained to me that the Gora family had always made it an explicit point to shake hands with all visitors coming to the Atheist Centre, to offer them water in a glass and, moreover, to make sure that their



lips touch the glass. Mythrie narrated how people from "low-caste" and "untouchable" backgrounds were particularly hesitant in their interactions, but they were literally 'made' to have self-respect, for example, by asking them to sit down on a chair of equal height rather than stand or crouch on a low stool.

As Mythrie explained these things to me, she started re-enacting such a situation and said in a suddenly very stern and serious voice: "No! You sit! If I sit, you sit. If I sit on the floor, you also sit on the floor. If I sit on a chair, you also sit on a chair!" Pointing her finger demandingly at the chair next to hers: "We will not talk unless you sit down!" Then her features relaxed again, she smiled, and went on with our conversation. While Mythrie is a very warm and cordial person, she can certainly command great authority if required. She explained that at the Atheist Centre everybody was treated as part of their family, the occasional international visitor as well as their kitchen help. Regardless of whether or not some of their hired staff even understand it fully, they were treated on equal terms and as members of the family. And yet, what kind of equality and self-respect are actually produced in such interactions?

I argue that these interactions and practices as well as accounts of "human mingling" are not about 'interior' feelings of equality and self-respect but about the creation of scenarios where people can interact outside the ambit of hierarchies established 'a priori' by differences of castes and religions; this, however, does not automatically preclude that people have gained unequal degrees of eminence or command unequal degrees of authority and agency. In other words, these scenarios are not meant to establish feelings of abstract, unconditional equality but a community of sentiment where humans interact as 'equal with regard to castes and religions'. They are occasions for atheists to perform humanism by transforming inequalities and hierarchies based on castes and religions into differentially distributed public sentiments of heroism, self-respect, eminence, appreciation, praise et cetera.

Sentiments can be 'distributed' in this way precisely because they are *public* rather than interior to the psyche of individuals. I am aware that the scenarios and sentiments I have mentioned so far, including the Beef and Pork Friendship Function, are all in a sense narrated, that is, they are accounts of sentiments. I approach sentiments here similarly to how literary scholar Sianne Ngai (2005, 38–88) conceptualises the "tone" or "tonality" of a text, namely as its aesthetic attunement to



actual social relations and the ideology underpinning them. Ngai uses the Heideggerian notion of attunement (*Stimmung*) in order to add an aesthetic and affective dimension to Louis Althusser's (2014: 184) discussion of how ideology, defined as "an imaginary relation to real [social] relations", is materialised in ideological apparatuses. Interesting for my discussion of sentiments is Ngai's argument that the tone of a text is located neither in the reader's feelings nor in the feelings of characters represented within the text; rather, the tonality of a text—*qua* materialised and affective ideology—accomplishes an attunement between imaginary and real social relations precisely by confounding the location of feelings: "[T]one is a feeling which is perceived rather than felt and whose very *nonfeltness* is perceived. There is a sense, then, in which its status as feeling is fundamentally negative, regardless of what the particular quality of affect is" (Ngai 2005: 76, emphasis in original).

By distinguishing feeling and perceiving as different modes of experiencing a sentiment, and by including even an experience of "nonfeltness", it becomes possible to approach atheists' accounts of sentiments in terms of the ideological work they perform. I argue that accounts of interactions, just like interactions themselves as well as the material things these involve—morsels of meat, unhygienic environments, drinking vessels, chairs et cetera—are ways to make sentiments public by making them perceptible, rather than felt. Accounts of 'castelessness', professions of atheism, or declarations of humanist equality which either accompany scenarios in real time or produce them retrospectively perform the important ideological work of relating 'real' interactions to imaginaries of humanism; in other words, accounts are an instrumental part of realising atheist humanism as an actual aesthetic formation, among other things by distributing public, that is perceptible, sentiments. The crucial question is not whether the people with whom Mythrie or Gora interacted really 'felt' self-respect but whether they sat down on a chair of equal height and thus 'performed' it; in the same way as the Beef and Pork Friendship Function was not about making meat part of one's daily diet or even about overcoming bodily aversions to beef and pork, but about a public act of ingesting them anyways, namely as "bitter pills of medicine" and as a performance of "one-humanity."

I do not mean to imply, however, that such ideological work is always felicitous or that it is enough to simply name or narrate sentiments in order to distribute them. Besides the successful accounts above, I have also encountered narratives which demonstrate different



ways in which caste can 'stick' to both upper and lower caste people irrespective of their attempts at verbal or practical disavowal, transformation, and distribution. The Atheist Centre itself is a striking example: its disavowal of caste is widely known and can hardly be denied, but it is still remembered—or rather perceived—that the Goras had once been Brahmin.

Nau, Saraswathi's and Gora's youngest daughter and current director of one of their NGOs for rural development, narrated to me how her parents had tried to implement a feeding programme in a nearby Dalit colony, where they wanted to provide food to the local residents. She told me that the people there had been suspicious and rejected the food, and that it had taken her parents a lot of time and great effort to eventually gain their trust. I was surprised, for anthropological literature would suggest that food transactions are problematic when food moves from 'lower' to 'upper' castes and not the other way around. Nau, however, explained that Dalits had not understood why "these people", that is evidently upper caste people, suddenly came and gave them food when they had experienced so much oppression and violence from upper castes in the past. Thus, the mere physical presence of upper caste people in a Dalit colony and their intention to mingle as casteless humans does not automatically transform previous experiences of caste distinctions into distributed sentiments of heroism and self-respect, as suggested by Shariff Gora's account above.

Many outsiders refer to the Gora family as peddavallu, a Telugu term for great or eminent people, which does not have to but can refer to caste status. From the perspective of the Atheist Centre, its status is in no way related to the Goras' Brahmin past but to their merit which is even heightened precisely by their voluntary abdication of all caste privileges. The Goras are eminent people for many reasons like, for example, their earlier participation in the freedom struggle, their unflinching dedication to practical Atheism, their consistent involvement in social service activities, or their prominence in local and regional media. And yet, there are critics of the Atheist Centre, even within the atheist movement, who claim that despite all its anti-untouchability programmes the Atheist Centre has always remained a "Brahmin agraharam"¹⁰ and that it propagated "Brahmin atheism." Such accusations of casteism were initially puzzling to me, given the more than 60 year-long history of the Atheist Centre's categorical and unequivocal rejection of caste in both verbal and practical forms.



In any case, the Atheist Centre is by no means the only atheist organisation which has to face such allegations, as it is very common within the atheist movement to accuse rivaling individuals or organisations of lingering practices and sentiments of casteism. The Rationalist Society of India, for instance, is sometimes dismissed as a group of "Kamma rationalists", just as other groups with closer ties to the Ambedkarite movement are disparaged as "Dalit atheists." Since accusations of casteism are indeed pervasive within the atheist movement, the question arises whether the transformation of caste hierarchies into distributed sentiments does indeed qualify as an annihilation of caste—which is, after all, what atheist anti-caste programmes are professedly aiming for. It would thus be necessary to clarify at which point the change of a particular form of social organisation is 'radical' enough to qualify as its annihilation. In what follows, however, I argue that the way this question is posed already presupposes caste as an external object of atheist programmes, whereas it is methodologically sounder to conceive the relationship between atheism and caste as one of mutual implication within concrete, materialised aesthetic formations.

Conclusion: Atheist Humanism and the Persistence of Caste

Satish Deshpande (2014) has identified the political aftermath of the *Mandal Commission Report* in the 1980s as a major turning point for public discourses on the role of caste in modern India. Previously, the predominant mode of talking about caste had been marked by nationalist narratives of transition: from colonialism to independence, from feudalism to capitalism, from tradition to modernity, and indeed from the caste system to its annihilation. Deshpande argues that after the Mandal Commission a new sensibility vis-à-vis caste has emerged, a sensibility which is no longer expecting an "imminent transition" but assumes the continuity of caste in various, transfigured forms: "[Caste] is not a virtue or a vice but rather a contextual frame that inevitably colours everything within it" (ibid.: 11). Recent literature on socio-religious reform movements in colonial and post-colonial India has consequently shown that social reform has been to a very large extent an upper caste and upper-/middle class endeavour, which has frequently ended up reproducing and even reinforcing the very power relations it set out to dismantle in the first place (Nanda 1985; Kishwar 1985; Sen 2003; Watt 2005; Inna Reddy 2011; Ramakrishna 2013; Sarkar 2013).



This change from transition to continuity as the guiding motif in speaking about caste is of crucial significance for atheists, as they continue to aim for its complete annihilation but do so within an altered overall discursive framework. Once caste is conceived as a "contextual frame that inevitably colours everything within it" (Deshpande 2014: 11) and as reproducing itself perpetually, endeavours to annihilate it must appear doomed from the start. While some self-evident and clearly identifiable forms of caste have in fact been criminalised and may have subsided over the last decades, caste has been perceived to reappear in more slithery and diffuse but no less sticky forms; caste has become indeed a "colour" or, in Ngai's words, a "tone" of social relations, which may persist even when casteism is explicitly disavowed. It is common among my interlocutors to attribute the tenacious persistence of caste discrimination to the cause that, despite all efforts of reform, caste is simply "in the blood" of Indians. The focus on the historical and political adaptability and persistency of caste enables its critique at a more sophisticated level, yet simultaneously seems to foreclose the possibility of actually getting rid of it for good.

Vivek Dhareshwar argues that the possibility to do disavow caste is anyways restricted to an upper caste and upper class subject position, which is able to effectively displace—in my words 'distribute'—experiences and practices of caste onto those at the bottom of the caste/class hierarchy: "To speak about caste, or to theorize it, in English, in the political idiom, however eclectic it may be, that English makes available, is already to distance caste practice as something alien to one's subject position" (Dhareshwar 1993: 118).

By "political idiom" Dhareshwar means a whole "semiotic system signifying modernity" (ibid.: 116) which has been made available through English but can be articulated perfectly well in other Indian languages as well.¹¹ 'Modernist' critiques of caste—like the one articulated by my atheist interlocutors—allow upper caste subjects to dissociate ideologically and experientially from caste by transforming it into a discursive object which, qua object, is necessarily located outside the subject and can thus be displaced onto the lower caste 'other'. Since this 'modernist' subject position is usually less available to lower castes, they tend to continue articulating their critiques in terms of caste which, in turn, reinforces the initial displacement: the lower castes' insistence on suffering caste discrimination is considered to confirm that they have not yet been able to come out of a casteist mind-set themselves, as they continue to see caste everywhere—even where it is expressly disavowed.



In a very similar way, caste is vehemently and unanimously rejected by atheists and, at the same time, it constantly encroaches upon them, when others accuse them of lingering or dissimulated casteism. Dhareshwar's analysis is useful here, because it shows that caste is not only part of the cultural or religious background of atheism and, therefore, merely an object of atheist critique; rather, in the discursive environment of 'post-Mandal India', caste is internal to its critique insofar as the subject position of 'castelessness' is itself inflected by caste. The question I am raising here is thus not whether atheist programmes deliver on humanist ideology by 'really' annihilating caste, but rather how atheists participate in, depend on, and relate to changing aesthetic formations of caste in order to produce an alternative aesthetic formation of atheist humanism.

I argued above that atheist scenarios of "human mingling" transform caste hierarchies into differential agency and sentiments which are distributed unequally between atheist activists and those whom they seek to make into equal and self-respecting individuals. Sentiments like heroism and self-respect are thus part of an affectively mediated social relationship which realises atheists' social imaginary of humanism in the concrete form of an aesthetic formation. Agency and sentiments are not felt inside and then expressed; they are 'formed', that is made public and perceptible for self and others, by relating to caste in critical, transgressive, or dismissive ways. This aesthetic formation of humanism is therefore still inflected by caste, because—even when trans-'formed' through transgression and disavowal—caste is never just an external object of ideological critique but remains implicated in the spatial practices, material things, relations of power, behavioural habits, bodily reactions, and public sentiments in and through which its critique is put into practice.

The example of atheist disavowals and practical transgressions of "sectarian" or communalist ideologies of caste and religion as well as an explicit endorsement of humanism does not automatically entail the absence of social hierarchies and inequality, but it might very well indicate their transformation. My analysis locates the reason for the persistence of such transformed hierarchies not primarily at the level of actors' ideologies or intentions, but in what can be called their 'social aesthetics': the material, spatial, affective, and thus perceptible dimensions of the scenarios in which "sectarian" hierarchies are meant to be discarded, criticised, or transgressed. Following Deshpande and Ngai, I tried to capture this aesthetic quality of communal distinctions as well as their tendency to persist despite discursive disavowals by



describing them as a tone or colour of social relations. It furthermore registered in my interlocutors' somewhat defeatist remark that caste was simply "in the blood" of Indians.

The persistence and "stickiness" (Ahmed 2004: 89–92) of caste also surfaces as accusations of lingering casteism within the atheist movement and challenges atheists' sincerity: according to my interlocutors, 'true' atheists cannot be casteist. Given that none of my interlocutors have ever come out in defence of caste, these accusations point beyond the failure of individuals or particular organisations and effectively question whether atheists' anti-caste activism in the form of "human mingling" is as such an efficacious means for social reconstruction.

Many people I have met both within and outside the atheist movement claim, for example, that the introduction of railways and the long-distance travel they enabled were much more effective in doing away with caste than all deliberate projects of social reform: during a twenty or thirty-hour train ride people of different castes were simply forced to mingle, sit next to each other, and eventually eat if not together than at least in each other's presence. If some of the atheist movement's goals of social reconstruction seem to have been realised on their own and in the wake of much larger historical transformations underway in Indian society, deliberate programmes for the annihilation of caste might not be identifiable as a cause for social change but rather as part of it.

By way of conclusion, I want to give room to the voice of another atheist activist, an acclaimed atheist orator called Katti Padma Rao. Especially in his function as a noted Dalit leader, Katti Padma Rao is sceptical—to say the least—about the castelessness of ex-upper caste atheists and the atheist movement in general. In one of our interviews, he argued that large-scale processes like globalisation and economic liberalisation were in fact much more effective in alleviating caste discrimination than his fellow atheists' anti-caste activism. This is quite rare because most of my atheist interlocutors in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana adhere to leftist critiques of globalisation and identify neoliberal capitalism as a primary cause of social inequality and indeed a sort of pseudo-theism. Katti Padma Rao, however, asserted that:

Untouchables want all this globalisation and *liberalisation*. They want it because when globalisation happened, the untouchable got a mobile phone, he got a TV. [They] brought cars, he got a car. [...] The Hindus didn't like that. *Equal!* Then there were Brahmins, they had a mobile phone, they had a *telly*. [Now] if a Brahmin has a TV, a Dalit has one too; a Brahmin has books, a Dalit



has books too. [...] Before, there was *sanskritization*: They have these things, the others have those things. There were books, here was labour equipment, knives et cetera. Now? Equality! [laughs]. [...] I mean, anybody is using these things: that is *marketing*. What does *marketing* do? It has no caste. There is no caste for the *market*.¹²

Katti Padma Rao continued to explain that nowadays Dalits wore branded clothes from London and "Colgate" addressed them as a lucrative target group for toothpaste products, while in the 1960s many Dalits did not even have a table in their houses or shirts on their bodies. He went on to explain that globalisation, liberalisation, and privatisation were beneficial and necessary for "those below" (*kindavallu*) but a loss for "the one on top" (*paivadu*). He was still critical of boundless consumerism and certain forms of aggressive capitalism, but he made the point that, as far as social mobility for Dalits was concerned, market capitalism was still preferable to *sanskritisation*.

Katti Padma Rao's account as well as the 'railway-argument' call into question the causal efficiency of atheist endeavours to annihilate caste through practices of "human mingling", because they portray the attenuation of caste discrimination as a more or less unintentional epiphenomenon of large-scale social change. Once social change is attributed to impersonal or abstract agencies like railways, globalisation, or the market, this alters what people deem appropriate as a means of anti-communal social reform; however, it also impacts on the ways in which existing or desired social distinctions may be reclaimed and materialised. Such larger social and discursive transformations need to be seen in relation to tenacious and deeply entrenched aesthetic dimensions of social distinctions. It is by developing frameworks for more systematic analyses of such relations that we may gain a better understanding of, for example, the ways in which recent violence in the context of 'cow protection' campaigns relate to the long history of communal pluralism in South Asia—as well as the equally long history of attempts at transcending that pluralis

Endnotes

¹ Express Web Desk. 2016. Beef row: where it is illegal and what the law says. *The Indian Express*, July 27.

<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/beef-madhya-pradesh-video-cow-vigilantes-gau-rakshaks-2938751/> [retrieved 14.10.2016];

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Pandit, Ambika. 2015. Muslim organisations demand complete ban on beef exports from India. Times of India. *The Times of India*, June 10.,

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Muslim-organisations-demand-complete-ban-on-beef-exports-from-India/articleshow/53658625.cms> [retrieved 14.10.2016];

Pattanaik, Devdutt. 2015. Holy cow, unholy violence. *The Hindu*, Oct. 6.,

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/holy-cow-unholy-violence/article7727157.ece> [retrieved 14.10.2016].

² I use inverted commas as a reference to the supposed exceptionalism of 'Indian' secularism, as opposed to its 'Western' counterparts, which is usually seen in its decidedly benevolent and affirmative stance towards religion. As a political ideology and a project of governance—according to some commentators and politicians also as an inherent quality of Indian civilisation—Indian secularism is neither itself irreligious nor does it regulate religions by keeping them out of politics and the public sphere; rather, its defining trait is seen in accommodating all religions with equal respect so as to avert the corruption of India's 'unity in diversity' into potentially violent forms of communalism (van der Veer 1994 and van der Veer 2001; Bhargava 1998; Needham & Sunder Rajan 2007; Tejani 2008; Bajpai 2015). Many aspects of this ideal understanding of Indian secularism have been thoroughly scrutinised as far as their historical development and conceptual as well as practical shortcomings are concerned, but the taken-for-granted absence and virtual expulsion of irreligiosity from the conceptual scheme and actual regime of 'Indian' religious secularism have largely escaped the critical radar.

³ Unless otherwise noted, Indian terms in brackets are Telugu.

⁴ "Atheist Centre." 2015.

<http://atheistcentre.in/> [accessed 14.10.2016].

⁵ The Atheist Centre and the Gora family had joined the Congress movement during the Quit India Movement in 1942 and has continued to take part in the Sarvodaya movement after independence. The Atheist Centre is very proud of its nationalist credentials and sees no overt contradiction between their Gandhian values and their commitment to atheism. In fact, the Gora family argues that Gandhi talked about theist and religious concepts like god, soul force, or spirituality only in order to clothe his radical ideas in conventional language and thus make them palatable to a wider audience. They furthermore consider Gandhi to have been an atheist as far as his actions were concerned and, had he lived longer, he would have sooner or later matched his discourse as well (Gora 1988; Lavanam 1996; 2003; Lavanam & Lindley 2005).

⁶ Birgit Meyer coined the concept of "aesthetic formation" as, among other things, a further development of Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined community" (1983) and defined it thus: "The term aesthetic formation, then, highlights the convergence of processes of forming subjects and the making of communities—as social formations. In this sense, "aesthetic formation" captures very well the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things [...]" (Meyer 2009: 7).

⁷ This refers to the marriage of Gora's and Saraswathi's eldest daughter, Manorama, to a man called Arjun Rao, a collaborator of Gora's with a Dalit family background; Lavanam, their second child, was married to Hemalatha who is the daughter of the famous Dalit/Christian poet, Gurram Jashuva.

⁸ Shariff Gora. Hyderabad, January 14, 2014; recorded interview in English.

⁹ According to Kim Knott, spaces are secular if they have no "necessary or apparent religious basis or reference" (2014: 36) and thus give space to a variety of heterogeneous actors to negotiate religious, secularist, or postsecularist standpoints, values, beliefs et cetera. Here, secular space



seems to be defined again by the absence of religion which allows the containment or rather the production of the religious and non-religious within it. I want to explore a different approach here, where space is not just the arena for the production of the religious/secular binary—or its rejection from a postsecular standpoint—but an affectively invested and discursively enfolded aspect of, using a phenomenological idiom, 'being-in-the-world' as secular or religious.

¹⁰ In the middle ages, an *agraharam* was land, often linked to temples, which was donated to Brahmins by kings, whereas today it refers more generally to exclusively Brahmin neighborhoods or settlements. In the South-Indian Non-Brahmin movement, the term *agraharam* was furthermore used in order to criticise the cultural and political dominance of Brahmins in the colonial public sphere, for example, by describing the Indian National Congress or certain administrative bodies as a Brahmin *agraharam* (cf. Pandian 2007: 100–1).

¹¹ Sheldon Pollock (2006) and Sudipta Kaviraj (2010) argue that the relationship between English and so-called 'vernaculars' indexes social hierarchies which have a pre-history in the relationship between Sanskrit and regional (Sanskrit: *desi*) languages. Kaviraj, in particular, focuses on the problem of linguistic restrictions on insubordination in a situation where local forms of protest would have been forced to inscribe themselves into Sanskrit discourses if they were to aspire to any supra-regional influence. Both Kaviraj and Dhareshwar imply that supra-regional or, in Pollock's terms, cosmopolitan political discourses—rather than just linguistic codes—tend to produce discourses of conservatism or reaction by virtue of being the idiom of elites. As a consequence, criticism of caste would remain ineffective as long as it remains expressible only in the discourse or political idiom of 'English modernity'—irrespective of whether or not it is articulated in the English language.

¹² Katti Padma Rao. Ponnur, December 31., 2014; recorded interview in Telugu, italics indicate English in original.

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