Introduction

Symbolically, “where’s the beef?” is a challenge or claim indicating that an idea is without sufficient substance. Exactly similar is the situation in Maharashtra where a ban on beef has been enforced.

While this is a particularly harsh law, legal provisions for restricting or banning cow slaughter are rather common: 26 states in India have laws which either regulate or ban cow slaughter.

Surprisingly, India is the world's second largest exporter of beef, second only to Brazil. According to The Atlantic, last year India exported $4.3 billion worth of beef.

The Maharashtra Government’s Animal Preservation (Amendment) Bill 1995 that received Presidential assent on March 3, 2015 has impacted lots of lives. People at both ends of the spectrum—those who consume meat and those involved in the trade are affected by the Maharashtra government’s decision.

The slaughter of cows was previously prohibited in the state under the Maharashtra Animal Preservation Act of 1976. However, the passage of the new Act will ban the slaughter of bulls as well as bullocks, which was previously allowed based on a fit-for-slaughter certificate. In fact, the very possession of beef – much like, say, cocaine – is now punishable with a prison sentence.

The new Act will, however, allow slaughter of water buffaloes, which provides carabeef — generally seen as an inferior quality meat.

Maharashtra has Asia’s largest abattoir. Some of the implications of the ban are:

- The beef lovers have to make changes in their food habits.
- The multi cuisine hotels serving foreign have to change their major items in the menu. It may affect their sales.
- It has lead to shutting of major beef producing factories & slaughter houses and many have gone out of business.
- It is also likely to increase the cost of other types of meat, as demand goes up.
- More than "one crore Maharashtrians" are rendered without a source of livelihood.
- The worst hits are Querishi caste in Maharashtra, which largely work as butchers, agents and dealers. They are unskilled in other trades.
• Hindu farmers from across the state and neighboring Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were among those who sold their old and infirm cattle at the abattoir. Now they will either have to take care of these cattle at the cost of new ones or will be forced to abandon them. This is in light of decreasing cattle feed.

• This ban will significantly dent the leather industry. This ban also affects tanneries, cosmetics industries, meat packaging industry, and those utilizing animal products for research and medicine.

Some ironies:

➢ In the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Delhi, among others, if you are arrested for cow slaughter, you are automatically held guilty until proven innocent, overturning a fundamental principle of criminal law. The law is more lenient if you happen to kill a human being, though: you are presumed innocent till you are proven guilty.

➢ Like Maharashtra, Delhi also has strict provisions against all cow slaughter but posh restaurants in the city openly display what they call “beef” on their menus.

➢ In his prime ministerial campaign, Narendra Modi used the emotive power of the cow to attack the United Progressive Alliance government. “It saddens me,” he wrote on his blog, “that present UPA Government led by Congress is promoting slaughtering of cows and exporting beef to bring ‘Pink Revolution’. But actually, the “beef” that India exports is mostly buffalo and not cow meat & ironically, beef exports have risen since Modi came to power.

➢ The state targets cow protection is somewhat patchily, attacking only the act of slaughter when it is quite obvious that steak houses, tanneries or cricket ball manufacturers are as much to blame – after all these industries, by definition, necessitate the killing of the cow.

Hence, the cow here seems to be just a dog whistle with which to attack the minority & age-old communal stereotype of associating Muslims with beef consumption. It is more of a political issue than an issue if faith. Cow protection sentiments are exploited by the state and politicians to mobilize people and catch votes, targeting poor Muslims and Dalits by accusing them of cow slaughter.