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ARTICLE

Disgust and Disdain in Meat Interactions in Mumbai: Halal Practice, Industrial Meat Production, and Urban-Spatial Configuration

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Abstract

In Mumbai, the live slaughter of meat by Muslim butchers is an intergenerational caste practice and a source of livelihood and labour, supplying ritually slaughtered halal meat for Muslims, and fresh quality meat for others in the city. Yet in the neoliberal Hindu Nationalist imagination, the very sights, smells, and sounds of butchering are a sign of Muslim abjection, a source of disgust to be eradicated from the "world-class" Hindu city. Muslim butchers are further subject to an intra-Muslim caste politics of disdain, in which their contact with blood is thought to render them impure (na-pak) and untrustworthy. At butcher stores and meat markets, economic development, urban sanitation, and ritual ideologies recruit the senses into a politics of disgust and disdain. These affects are reflexively embodied in ways that reveal the intimate relation between individualising forms of Islamic piety, Muslim infrastructural marginalisation, and the making of a sanitised neoliberal Hindu city.

Keywords: caste; disdain; disgust; halal; meat; space

Offence and disdain: halal exchange, piety, and urban space

One warm September afternoon in 2013, I was sitting with Hassan at his small butcher store in an elite neighbourhood in South Mumbai. As we chatted, a Muslim customer dressed in a kurta and skullcap approached the store with an order of chicken. As usual, Hassan took the customer order, grabbed hold of a live chicken that he assumed would approximate the weight required, and placed it on the countertop scale for approval before handing it over to Salahuddin for slaughter. On this occasion, however, the customer muttered something about halal and a prayer being recited and stepped closer to Salahuddin to inspect for evidence of recital. Hassan, visibly irritated, replied, "we are Muslim, we slaughter halal." Salahuddin, now under surveillance, recited the tasmiya, "Bismillah Allahu Akbar" before slaughter, this time louder than usual, his lips visibly moving, and the utterance audible as a whisper. Within a few minutes, the

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chicken had been skinned and prepared according to the customer specification. As he left the store, Hassan and Salahuddin immediately turned to each other and to me in exasperation. For Hassan, this customer was offensive and could not appreciate that halal slaughter as a livelihood practice is different from the practices of sacrifice (Qurbani), where slaughter is performed in the home, and much more care and attention is paid to each animal. In everyday butcher practice, slaughter proceeds quickly and efficiently to service the high customer demand. Salahuddin, the head slaughterer who had worked for Hassan for well over a decade, added, "this is our job, everything is halal, we always recite, sometimes loud, sometimes from the heart (dil se) … it gets busy."

Evident in this interaction is the exchange of meat, money, and disdain. The customer's sense of disdain is embodied in his distrust of Hassan and Salahuddin as low-caste Muslim butchers, who are often suspected of lapsing in their compliance with the ritual prescriptions of halal slaughter. Hassan and Salahuddin, in turn, express a sense of disdain towards the customer, considering his request an offence, a violation of their Muslim identity and livelihood practice. The exchange of disdain reveals how a set of caste assumptions of Muslim butchers as unruly, profit-oriented, and untrustworthy intersects with a halal ritual ideology of trust, salvation, and ingestion within intra-Muslim networks of trade and exchange. In Mumbai, I was frequently told that all meat in the city is halal since all the butchers are Muslim and therefore ritually obliged to perform halal slaughter. Their Muslim identity and caste-based occupational skill are an assurance of halal quality. But around the world, halal exchange is being recalibrated by halal certification as a documentary and audit form of trust beyond Muslim networks (Tayob 2020). And halal piety is emerging as a reflexive practice of the individual self at the intersection of public consumption, evidentiary ritual compliance, and knowledge of food production processes (Tayob 2016). The customer suspicion and demand for evidence of ritual compliance in Mumbai contravene the relations of intra-Muslim halal exchange, restored and reclaimed by Hassan and Salahuddin through their disdain, offence, and assertion of ritual commitment.

Exchanging disdain, Hassan, Salahuddin, and the enquiring customer, reflexively embody the role of Muslim butcher and vigilant but suspicious pious consumer, each drawing on a distinct set of assumptions and presuppositions of each other, and of the proper practice of halal. Safwan Amir (2019) has argued that in India, the disdain and contempt towards forms of labour associated with impurities of hair, carcasses, blood, and waste intersect with Islamic ritual categories of impurity (najis), in marking persons and spaces as sites of stigma. And Qudsiyah Contractor (2021) has shown how, for residents of a Mumbai Muslim slum, Hindu ritual aversion to cow slaughter intersects with Muslim ritual impurity (najis), and modern notions of hygiene in casting them and their neighbourhood as undesirable and defiled. However, Muslim butchers are crucial for the culinary life of the city. Butcher stores such as Hassan's are present in every neighbourhood, servicing Muslim and non-Muslim meat consumption. It is common for individuals and families to have multi-decade and multi-generational relationships with butchers, with whom relations of trust and taste are crucial. And suspicion of the halal quality of food supplied by a fellow Muslim is considered to constitute an offence. Relations of caste contempt, aversion, and disdain towards

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Muslim butchers intersect with the desire for meat that is halal-slaughtered, fresh, and tasty.

The significance of the affective exchange of disdain, suspicion, and offence, this paper argues, is that it happens in the space-time of Mumbai, where a right-wing neoliberal Hindu Nationalist politics of Muslim abjection and disgust seek to displace and replace the position of the Muslim butcher in the culinary life of the city (Mirza 2022). Where Hindu Nationalist articulations turn on a particular calibration of Hindu reformist ideology of ahimsa (non-violence) and Hindu purity in the evocation of disgust towards the Muslim other (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012; Lee 2021, 7–10); neoliberal development aims for the sanitisation and purification of urban space and subjects in the making of a world-class city without the polluting substances and subjects of life, death, and labour (McFarlane 2008) (Shah 2014). Here, halal contestations of contempt and disdain amidst changing halal ritual ideologies of trust and piety may, in fact, confirm the very operation of disgust and aversion in neoliberal Hindutva politics, in seemingly subtle but meaningful ways.

I thus consider displays of disgust and disdain to be distinct but intimately related types of affective displays, which differ in their intensity of embodiment, are formulated and construed through distinct and varied ideologies of self and other, and the socialised ability to perform or construe them constitute tools or affordances for relations of trade and exchange, allowing them to be severed or sustained. The semiotics of disgust and disdain that this paper develops reveals these affects emerging not as a matter of the self (Durham 2011), of culture or structure (Douglas 1966) (Kristeva 1982), or of historically mediated subject positions (Ahmed 2013). But as a reflexive embodiment dialectically inseparable from the contexts in which they emerge, and the ideologies and reflections that encapsulate and shape them as affordances for relations of consumption and trade.

Mary Douglas (1966) is insightful in identifying disgust and aversion as a universal question of order and threat, culturally informed. And Sarah Ahmed reveals disgust as "mediated by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others and the way those impressions surface as bodies" (Ahmed 2013, 83). Both are crucial for moving beyond liberal individualising notions of disgust as "a way of physical knowing that can be at odds with discursive or rational knowing" (Durham 2011, 139) and "reasoned morality" (Durham 2011, 147), which aim to unsettle "liberal western sense" (Durham 2011, 132). The structural-linguistic analysis of Douglas and the political-historical analysis of Ahmad emphasise dynamic but coherent social or historical formations, where subjects inhabit roles through expressions of disgust and aversion. The same operation is evident in work on qualia, which trains attention to how particular sensory qualities become iconically linked to forms of subjectivity, space, and value, across moments of historical change (Harkness 2013). Foregrounding moments of change and social positioning, qualia offer insight into how the self and the senses are recruited into social and political formations of order and transformation, constituting an "orientation for reflexive, group-defining conduct" (Harkness 2015). However, as Adrienn Cohen (2025) argues, in this work there is little orientation to reflexive judgments of whether a particular qualisign, in fact, meets the criteria of iconicity that ensure the alignments necessary for "group-defining conduct."

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In South Asia, disgust and disdain are affects that mediate social relations of hierarchy and power (Lee 2021) (Kapoor 2021). Yet the way these affects emerge and are evaluated depends very much on the subjects, ideologies, and spaces of interaction (Kapoor 2025). Differences of religion, caste, occupation, and location matter for how activities are evaluated, the kinds of affects generated, and the affordances they may have for relations of trade, consumption, and exchange, severed or sustained. Caste disgust, repulsion, and aversion indicate a transparency of occupation, substance, and subject in a sensory, spatial, and hierarchical relation to others. Yet with halal practice and exchange, a universal Islamic discourse of ritual capacity, obligation, and opacity is embodied in the ingestion of food produced by those deemed lower. Disdain, a less intense affect of aversion legible in the body and voice as a force of ridicule, contempt, and hierarchy, better captures the relation of necessity, trust, and distance that marks halal meat exchange (Amir 2019). These overlapping and divergent ideologies of self, other, occupation, and ingestion through disgust and disdain matter for the way they are performed and construed in meat interactions in Mumbai. In the process, we obtain a view of sensory evaluation and intra-community caste relations in South Asia that are not unidirectional or conceived as a cultural system, but are dialogic, relational, and potentially open for unlikely intimacies and alliances across identities and prescribed roles.

Asef Agha's (2007) model of the reflexive embodiment of language foregrounds how the embodied and the material are inseparable in ways that connect individuals to each other and to broader cultural formations across space and time in complex, unequal, and reflexive ways (Agha 2007, 9–10). Enregisterment is the process whereby to speak, to feel, and to sense is to inhabit a position, a stance, and a role in relation to a set of available discursive and material assertions, assumptions, and presuppositions (Agha 2005). It is a process of alignment where actors reflexively inhabit socially available codes, and it is ripe for creativity and critique as the norms of language, speaker, sensation, and role are reflexively grasped and embodied (trope) in unpredictable ways. He thus urges attention to the way that "cultural formations…unfold one participation framework at a time" (Agha 2007, 9). As Jay Schutte (2019) has argued, encounters, interactions, and utterances are not events that happen in context, but are dialectically "contingent on, and constitutive of, the historical and material conditions of their contextualisation" (Schutte 2019, 3). Interactions, utterances, and embodied exchanges of disgust and disdain may thus reveal the dialectical and therefore critical potential inherent in these very moments, as actors inhabit and suture disparate framings of scale, value, time, sense, and subjectivity in reflexive ways.

In this paper, I develop a semiotics of disgust and disdain through a consideration of the ritual ideologies, practical activities, and roles that are presupposed and reflexively embodied in meat interactions in Mumbai. The way that disgust and disdain are embodied and construed constitutes a contested and dynamic affective exchange, which contours and contestations reveal the political, economic, and relational stakes of feeling for livelihood, space, and ingestion in the city. I used the term embodiment to refer to the way that ritual ideology, substances, and relations are registered through the senses and expressed in gesture and ingestion. Affect, a term usually employed to describe the way that feelings saturate substances, subjects, and space, is shown to be generated through practical activity, embodied relations, and distinct ideologies of

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meat, personhood, trade, and ingestion. Against saturation as a force that forecloses an alternative, I account for the contestations that remain even as dominant caste and political-economic formations around meat and sanitation cohere in powerful ways.

I begin with a consideration of the ritual ideology of halal as practised by Muslims in Mumbai, in which the ritual imperative for intra-Muslim trust is embedded in the occupational specialisation of Muslim butcher castes in the city. I then turn to moments of Muslim suspicion and doubt in halal quality, inspired by the changing political economy of industrial meat production and sanitised consumption that coalesces with the exclusion and elision of Muslim trade and livelihood in urban India. New spaces and products of halal sanitised consumption partake in recasting Muslim butcher practices as dirty and disgusting. In the final section, I consider how the desire for taste, freshness, and quality meat may ensure the maintenance of relations of exchange between Muslims and non-Muslims in ways that displace the forces of abjection and disgust that seek to replace and displace meat relations and spaces in the city. Throughout, we obtain a sense of how meat interactions in Mumbai are shaped by the way that disgust and disdain, and the socialised ability to perform or construe them, constitute tools or affordances for relations of trade and exchange, severed or sustained.

Ritual ideologies of trust, caste, and intra-Muslim trade

Significant in the opening interaction is that the enquiring customer is not disgusted by the substances or practices of slaughter. Concerned with the halal quality of meat consumed, and suspicious of Muslim butcher compliance with the ritual prescription for slaughter, they embody halal consumption as a reflexive practice of the self in relation to a literal and constricted understanding of Islamic dietary law. For them, the halal quality of chicken at Hassan's store is produced through the performative utterance of the tasmiya (Bismillah Allahu Akbar) upon slaughter. The utterance contains an illocutionary force whereby meat attains the quality of halal, meaning permissible for Muslim consumption, and thus suitable for Muslim trade and ingestion (Austin 1955). Indeed, the utterance of the tasmiya upon slaughter is in Mumbai widely regarded as the major condition of halal ritual practice. The issue, however, is that in most cases of Muslim meat consumption, slaughter is performed by an intermediary. Consuming halal meat at a Muslim-owned restaurant or purchasing ready-slaughtered products from a Muslim butcher means that one is not privy to the actual process of slaughter. The consumer in practice trusts the butcher or supplier that the halal procedure has been complied with. Far from merely a technical matter in a dense metropolis, the question of trust in halal exchange is in Islamic discourse articulated at the intersection of intention (niyyat), salvation, sin, doubt, and Muslim exchange relations. It is widely considered a sin (gunah) or a detestable act (makrooh) to doubt the halal quality of food supplied by a fellow Muslim. In the event of an untrustworthy supplier selling or serving non-halal meat, then the sin for transgression accrues to them. As Riaz, a trained aalim, explained, the issue of evidentiary demand upon slaughter is very simple: "if you make the shahadat (testament of faith) you are a Muslim, finished." There are, in theory, no salvationary consequences for the unintentional transgression of halal. Halal quality is in practice produced and sustained through reflection on the

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subjects, substances, divine and human-animal relations of slaughter, trade, gifting, and exchange.

Indeed, in Mumbai, I was frequently told that all meat in the city is halal, since all the butchers are Muslim. For most in the city, their Muslim identity and presumed Qureshi caste (butcher) status render them sufficiently trained and capable in the practice of halal slaughter. A universal Islamic discourse of ritual, trade, and ingestion both relies on and partially displaces embodied caste distinctions of occupation and pollution. This was clearly explained one morning by the restaurant manager of an incredibly popular Muslim-owned restaurant in the Muslim majority neighbourhood of Dongri, that many of my interlocutor's praise for the high quality of meat, food, and spices served there. Explaining my research interest in halal meat in the city, I enquired from Asadullah whether the meat for the day is, like other restaurants in the area, procured through arrangements with licenced butchers at the Deonar Municipal Abattoir. Asadullah replied that they, in fact, have live goats delivered daily to the store, which are then slaughtered, skinned, and prepared in a special slaughtering area out back. I was intrigued by the arrangement, wondering if perhaps it was due to halal concerns.

> No, no, here halal is not a problem, everything is coming from Deonar (Mumbai Municipal Abattoir) and there Muslims are slaughtering. Meat from there is being exported all over the world as halal. Those people that are doing the business, are those people who have recited, "Laa ilaha ill-Allah Muhammad-ur Rasulullah (There is no God but God and Muhammad is his messenger)," so they will answer to Allah.

At this point, a man sitting on the edge of the fishpond, waiting for an account query to be rectified, entered the conversation, "We don't have to worry, at the end of the day, we trust in them, they are Muslims," he added. Asadullah then offered an analogy between halal practice and congregational prayer,

> when we go to mosque, that Imam who leads, we don't know him, who he really is, but we make the niyyat (intention) to read behind the Imam. And if he is not pak (pure in body, thought and actions), then he must answer to Allah, not us. (Emphasis mine)

Asadullah's response is an assertion of the Muslim subjectivities, human-animal–divine relations, and trade networks presupposed and maintained through halal exchange in Mumbai. Comparing halal to congregational prayer is an astute observation in that in both cases the individual fulfils a ritual obligation through an intermediary, the imam (prayer leader) and the butcher (supplier). Asadullah explains that in instances of prayer and consumption, outward forms, names, and appearances do not reveal "who he really is." But the inter-subjective opacity of the other does not give rise to an incurable anxiety over ritual sincerity. Both Asadullah and the waiting supplier and others repeat that "we don't have to worry" and that "halal is not a problem." They situate halal as a matter of relation between Muslims, others, and God, whom one does not really know *but must trust*. The divine exchange implicit in halal ritual practice ensures that even in transgression, the self is secure since, "they will answer to Allah," "not us." The ritual ideology and practical calibration of halal as an

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intra-Muslim, divine exchange presupposes and reinforces the importance of Muslim butcher networks of slaughter and trade for the culinary life of the city. The sense of offence and disdain that Hassan and Salahuddin embody in their interaction with the suspicious customer secures their ethical subjectivity as ritual intermediaries of halal. Hassan's exclamation that "we are Muslim," and Salahuddin's assertion that "we always recite, sometimes aloud, sometimes from the heart," embody a tradition of halal trade and offence in the bustling meat markets of the city, in defence of their subjectivity and livelihood practice.

Yet the enquiring customer is not a singular phenomenon. Hassan often explained that while most Muslims do not query the halal status of his meat, some in fact do. As was the case that day, he dismisses them with a sense of disdain, as a ridiculous anomaly in the Muslim trade of halal. For the enquiring customers, however, the matter is anything but simple. Their concern over halal compliance and performance, and the demand for the audible recitation of the tasmiya, stem from a set of changing contexts in the city, where new forms of individual piety are emerging at the very same time as new locations of halal consumption beyond Muslim networks of slaughter, trade, and ingestion.

Doubt, suspicion, and communal politics: the neoliberal economy of sanitised halal and global trade

A few weeks later, I was passing through the Crawford Market area in South Mumbai, well known for the wholesale markets for clothing, electronics, cloth, and meat, located there. I was on my way to meet Tajuddin Qureshi, the owner of a licenced butcher stall in the mutton wholesale market, who lives in the area. I stopped to ask Irfan Bhai for directions towards the market, from where I could navigate myself to Tajuddin's home. Irfan Bhai owns a small dried-fruit and nut store on a busy intersection, directly in front of an American franchise Subway fast-food outlet. Stopping to ask him for directions, he pointed towards the market and enquired about my interest in the area. Introducing myself, I mentioned my research on Muslim food practices and halal. Hearing this, he immediately turned towards the Subway store in front of which we stood, "They got some certificate or what not, but the main thing is, how can a non-Muslim sell halal?" he asked. I hesitated in finding a response. Irfan Bhai continued, "see it's like this, if your wife makes lunch for you at home and then packs it into a tiffen (lunchbox) and sends it with a non-Muslim delivery person to your office, is it halal?" he asked. Sensing that this series of questioning was rhetorical, I let him continue, "No. It's not halal. Because the non-Muslim has touched it!" I now replied that this is a very harsh/strict (sakht) position. He agreed, adding, "You see if a non-Muslim is involved in the preparation, then *how can you be sure* it is halal? what if they added their own things?"

The Crawford Market is situated at the edge of Muhammad Ali Rd, home to a significant population of Muslim traders and labourers. The presence of the Subway fast food outlet here signals the intrusion of a global industrial standardised economy for food into a market space renowned for dense networks of religion, kinship, and caste, in production and trade. That it is halal certified indexes how halal certification entails a set of institutional and audit practices that promise to assure Muslims of halal quality beyond Muslim networks. But Irfan, in a rhetorical mood, questions the very premise

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of halal certification, that halal can simply be abstracted from Muslim relations of trade, salvation, and exchange. He then goes a step further, casting doubt on the institution of tiffin delivery, a renowned system of distribution of lunch-time meals from homes to offices in the city. Evoking touch and community, he expresses a sense of pollution and suspicion that bring together questions of identity and impurity, in a critique of non-Muslim involvement in the production, trade, and supply of halal.

But Irfan is suspicious of fellow Muslims as well, always insisting that the tasmiya ("Bismillah Allahu Akbar") is recited audibly upon slaughter when purchasing meat from his local butcher. The problem, he says, is that butchers are often uneducated and uninformed about halal practice, recounting instances where he had seen a butcher talking on the phone while slaughtering a chicken, for him, evidence that the correct attention and intention of halal slaughter is often not performed. Shifting to a mode of intra-Muslim critique, he expresses disdain towards Muslim butchers, scheduled caste labour often subject to accusations of intra-Muslim caste suspicion, contempt, and mistrust. His oscillation between suspicion of non-Muslim supply of halal and of Muslim butcher practice, points to the changing economy of halal in Mumbai, where halal is subject to political forms of abjection and exclusion, is simultaneously abstracted as a quality demanded by global fast food brands and hotel chains, and is being recalibrated as a practice of personal piety where relations of trade and exchange are displaced by work on the self. He and the enquiring customer at Hassan's store find a solution to the political and economic transformation of halal meat in the city in a restricted and constricted ideology of ritual performance that identifies the illocutionary act of slaughter and the prescribed utterance (tasmiya) as the singular condition of halal consumption. They situate the performance of ritual slaughter and the utterance of the tasmiya as a locus of practical reflexivity, whereby the evidence of recitation and slaughter observed by the senses constitutes the basis for halal quality and ingestion. They deny the pragmatic context of Muslim labour and trade of halal in the city, and the ritual ideology of trust, trade, intention (niyyat), salvation, and offence that forms the dominant discursive and practical basis of halal exchange in Mumbai.

Irfan Bhai, and the enquiring customer at Hassan's butcher store, are not simply mimicking a Hindu caste ideology of aversion to low-caste others. They are not disgusted by the act of slaughter, nor unwilling to be in proximity to animal death. They foreground doubt and suspicion in their demand for evidence of ritual compliance. Not satisfied with the opacity of Muslim subjectivity as authorised in traditions of Islamic law and practice, nor with the divine relationality of sin and salvation, they demand evidence of ritual utterance in a changing economy of meat and food in the city. Perhaps lost on Irfan Bhai is that his suspicion of Muslim butchers in his demand for evidence confirms the very ideology and presuppositions of halal certification that he too denounces. For halal certification, personal trust and niyyat (intention) are sidelined and rendered insufficient for the assurance of halal in the increasingly complex world of industrial food production and global supply chains (Tayob 2016). Muslim butchers are displaced from central figures in the production and supply of halal meat, to labourers or investors in the now industrial slaughter process, subject to the mediation of health experts, food technologists and ulama, audit documentation, and supply chain management. The illocutionary act of ritual slaughter and prayer is identified as the primary condition of halal-quality meat, which is then available for

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global trade and exchange beyond Muslim networks, given the requisite supply chain, production process, and retail audit management. Indeed, the Subway fast food outlet serves halal-certified meat without the visible presence of Muslim bodies. Here, the Hindu Nationalist imagination of a cleansed cityscape without Muslim bodies (Appadurai 2000), and butchers, is achieved through the halal certificate.

The relation between an exclusionary Hindu Nationalist politics of Muslim abjection and disgust, and industrial forms of meat production and trade, was made clear some months later at Hassan's butcher store, towards the end of 2013. We were discussing the ongoing and often-tabled municipal plans to modernise the meat industry by banning live-slaughter within the city limits. Our conversation tracked public debates wherein the looming success of the Hindutva-aligned Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the following year's national election oscillated between concerns over the threat of anti-Muslim communal violence and the promise of economic growth. Recognising that the big-business-friendly BJP may have the political will to enforce restrictions on inner-city slaughter, Hassan nevertheless remained sceptical of their power and confident in his customer preference for freshly slaughtered meat. He had already witnessed the attempts and failures of large supermarket chains to usurp business from the kirana dukan (corner store). And the corporate-owned industrial slaughterhouses that produce ready-cut-and-cleaned refrigerated chicken products rely on his presence as a distribution avenue in the city. In Mumbai, the failure of industrial meat production to eliminate inner-city slaughter and consumption practices appeared to forestall the coalition between communal politics and big-business-friendly economic practice.

Referring specifically to his customers' preference for freshly slaughtered chicken, Hassan mused:

> If they ban it, then out of compulsion (majburi se) people will eat it, but sales will go down. Muslims like to see the cutting in front of them … jab dekhte hai tab lete hai, sahi tareeqa halal ka dekhna chahiye … (when they see, they will take, they want to see the correct manner of halal). If it is somewhere else people will be unsure.

Foregrounding the forms of oppression (majboor) that circulate around his livelihood practice, Hassan evokes a Muslim desire to witness halal slaughter as a source of demand for fresh chicken. Yet most of Hassan's customers are in fact not Muslim, and he is always offended by the demands of his Muslim customers, as in the opening vignette, to observe evidence of halal ritual compliance. His evocation of sight and visibility thus points to the widely shared preference for freshly slaughtered chicken, and to a subtle distinction between the visibility of slaughter and the desire for evidence. His Muslim customers, according to him, should be comfortable with the fact that he and his Muslim employees in his butcher store, adorned with Islamic images and symbols, conduct slaughter in the store in full view, assuring them of fresh halal-slaughtered meat. They should not, however, demand evidence of ritual compliance, a desire for transparency that goes beyond the visibility of slaughter, piercing the authorised opacity of the Muslim ritual self. His distinction between the visibility of slaughter and the desire for ritual evidence reveals the stakes of halal contestations as implicated in the spatial and communal politics of meat and Muslim ritual in Mumbai.

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After all, the industrially produced "frozen" chicken that he stocks in refrigerators below his store counter is halal certified, with the words "Halaal" clearly printed on the package labelling. Employing Muslim labourers and complying with the documentary and audit requirements of halal certification, albeit without the politically contentious moon-and-star halal logo, "frozen" chicken threatens to replace Hassan's profit and place in the city. It is a material form of meat production, distribution, and consumption that renders practices of live slaughter potentially disgusting, in need of eradication from urban life. As Hassan one day explained mockingly in reference to customers of "frozen" chicken who occasionally approach the store while holding scarves over their noses to block the smell, "it is usually rich people … they feel sick when they see all the blood, the smell, even the sound of the chicken, and the cutting … our chicken when you take it home there is still blood on it, some feathers maybe. You have to wash it. That one ('frozen') is totally clean." Expressing signs of disgust when approaching his store, they too attract Hassan's disdain, their sense of defilement and pollution towards the space and the materiality of the meat, iconically attaching to him and his livelihood practice. In dispelling them with disdain, he reveals the way that industrial forms of slaughter and halal certification promote the Hindu Nationalist imagination of an urban cityscape without Muslim bodies and a geography of meat production without Muslim butchers (Ahmad 2013, 2014) (Ahmad 2018).

The exchanges of disdain legible at the intersection of ritual ideologies of halal and caste practices of distinction and aversion are inseparable from the new economy of meat in the making of a world-class Hindu city. The semiotics of suspicion and offence, a seemingly trivial matter of ritual compliance, in fact, reveals the stakes of pious consumer formations of halal as intimate with processes of urban sanitation and industrial accumulation. That this process draws Muslims in Mumbai into a set of relations and speculations of truth and trust, of sanitation and order, and exchanges of disgust and disdain, indicate how pious reflexivity may in fact coalesce seamlessly with the authoritarian neoliberal project of transforming the relations, networks, and spaces of trade and meat in the city.

By 2024, much had changed. The BJP had in 2014 won an electoral majority at both the national and Maharashtra state levels. In 2015, in a surprise decision, a ban on beef was declared in Mumbai, with major impact on Muslim livelihoods linked to the Municipal Deonar Abattoir and on smaller illegal inner-city operations. Demonetisation in November 2016 was, however, much more significant for Hassan in that the sudden declaration that large banknotes are no longer valid precipitated a rapid shift towards online payments. This was further spurred on by the lockdowns and social distancing during COVID-19, where inner-city markets were declared closed, and online delivery predominated. By June 2024, most small vendors in the city now accept UPI payments, and many restaurants and local shops are now linked to online delivery platforms.

Through an introduction from a friend in the city, an ex-Dongri resident who runs an online startup and now lives in Navi Mumbai, I was fortunate to meet two Muslim brothers, with corporate experience in banking and software engineering, who had come together to start what they describe as Mumbai's first online fresh meat delivery service. Having developed the software to manage delivery and stock management, they initially struggled to find funding but later partnered with a Hindu businessman

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who had invested in an industrial slaughter facility, but had not obtained the contract to supply KFC chicken that he had hoped. Together they have designed a system of centralised slaughter and decentralised cold-chain storage across the city, with the aim of supplying freshly slaughtered chicken and mutton, "always fresh, never frozen," except now with "no need to visit those shabby shops" of presumably questionable quality. Their company name, which I cannot disclose, clearly indicates the halal quality of the meat supplied. Aiming predominantly for a middle to upper-middle class non-Muslim clientele, they mobilise their Muslim identity as middle-class corporate professionals, not scheduled caste butchers. Muslimness, now abstracted from caste and occupation, is made available in consumer markets, while Muslim butchers such as Hassan are cast as "shabby," unprofessional, and unnecessary.

The interactions of disdain that circulate between Muslims in Mumbai in halal contestations are legible at the intersection of ritual ideologies of halal and caste assumptions of meat handling, with a new economy of production, space, and trade. The latter, as we have seen, partakes in a repertoire of disgust and disdain, whereby sanitised packaging and branding produce the inner-city butcher store or meat market as avoidable and dispensable. Scholars have argued that the abjection and stigmatisation of Muslim ritual, bodies, trades, and labour have been integral to the spatial configuration of the city, with Muslim localities excluded from municipal care, and the resulting squalor, disorder, and decay constituting a recursive sign authorising that very exclusion (Anand 2012). But Muslim butchers remain integral to the culinary life of the city, fulfilling the desire for fresh, tasty, quality meat by mostly non-Muslim consumers. Despite the affective, infrastructural, regulatory, and ritual pressures that circulate around their livelihood and trade, their continued presence and practice is a crucial location to observe the contestations over meat, smell, sight, and taste that are far from settled in the city. Indeed, not all are recruited into the circulations of disgust and disdain in the same way. Taste, freshness, and relations of trust constitute a set of desires and values that reflexively displace the neat teleology of development, efficiency, and sanitation that dominate the neoliberal aesthetics of space and subjectivity in the city.

The reflexive embodiment of disgust: taste, quality, and recognition

A few months after my interaction with the enquiring customer at Hassan's butcher store and Irfan Bhai's suspicions over halal, I was on an early morning visit to the Crawford Market chicken and mutton section to spend time with Tajuddin Qureshi at his licenced stand, where he prepares and processes mutton for supply to restaurants in the area. The Crawford Market is a prominent landmark and trading hub in South Mumbai that historically marks the border between the colonial and native towns; now recognised as the transition point between the wide avenues, open spaces, business districts, and affluent neighbourhoods of the south, and the congested gulleys, lanes, and markets of Muhammad Ali Road, heading north. The structure housing the chicken and mutton section was originally completed in the late 19th century, with butchers in the market quick to critically indicate to me that many of its key features had remained unchanged since. For them, evidence of the municipal neglect of meat infrastructure in the city. The space is lined with countertops and storage spaces where licenced butchers

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process goat and sheep carcasses delivered each morning from the Deonar Municipal Abattoir. Chicken wholesalers slaughter live chickens in an open courtyard behind the building and perform processing inside. The market is dominated by Muslim butchers who supply processed halal-slaughtered lamb, goat, and chicken meat to the many restaurants and hotels in South Mumbai.

Navigating the market, passing between butcher stands, negotiating blood-stained tiles, animal matter, and freshly slaughtered meat, is to be confronted by the faint odour of ammonia wafting from the live chicken coops just outside, mingling with the sweet slightly metallic smell of fresh meat, the sights of various cuts and entrails on full display, and the constant refrain of the heavy thud of the steel butcher knife against the wooden chopping block. It is also where I was often told that I would find the tastiest, freshest, and best quality mutton in the city. The desire for freshly slaughtered meat was fulfilled by the early morning deliveries of carcasses to the market, and the taste of the best quality, tender mutton mediated through relationships of trust with particular butchers. Tenderness depends mostly on the age of the goat or sheep, with younger animals of around one year of age having more tender meat than those older, often which have been raised for milk production and are thus cheaper. But age and animal health are difficult to discern after slaughter. Given the opacity between slaughter and meat consumption, relations of trust with particular butchers assure consumers that they are purchasing meat from healthy animals, of appropriate age, recently slaughtered, and carefully processed with no excess fat nor shards of broken bone included in mutton orders. Mutton with excess fat or small shards of bone attached to the flesh is an indication that the butcher has not carefully carved the meat with the skill and precision necessary for a sumptuous meal. And that one is paying the rate per kilogram for fat, which, in excess, is a sign of being cheated by an unscrupulous butcher. So in the Crawford Market, the transparency of meat production and preparation, of smell and sight, intersect with relations of trust that aim at the consumption of tender, fresh, and tasty meat. The desire for taste and tenderness necessitates Muslim butcher relationships and encounters with the substances of animal life and death.

This set of relations and qualities of trust, freshness, texture, skill, and taste has been crucial in forestalling the dominance of industrially produced meat in Mumbai. As one representative of an industrial meat production plant lamented, "in India there is this myth going around, that frozen is not fresh." His complaint is an indication of the relations and qualities that are desired for meat consumption in the city. Muslim butchers, figures of distrust, suspicion, and disdain, are crucial mediators of meat quality, taste, and freshness for non-Muslims across the city, who associate knowledge of animals and care in meat handling with Muslim butchers. Indeed, the choice of the two brothers above, in naming their meat startup with a clearly Muslim-associated term, was inspired by their awareness of the quality association of non-Muslims towards Muslim butchers in matters of meat. But these very market spaces and relations that ensure taste and quality are, in the Hindu-Right-wing imagination, a sign of Muslim abjection, of intimacy and indifference to animal life and death that render them beyond the pale of ethical capacity and regard (Basu et al. 1993). Disgust and aversion are materialised in urban space and infrastructure through the exclusion of Muslim localities and trades from municipal care. The dilapidated market building, a clearly Muslim infrastructure

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in a Muslim-dominated trade, built to service a much smaller demographic from a century ago, now bypassed by neoliberal projects of making Mumbai world-class. In meat interactions, the interplay of disdain and disgust is evident, which turns around Muslim butchers as mediators of quality and taste, subjects of disdain and suspicion that necessitate trust, and of aversion and disgust in the right-wing political economy of making a sanitised Hindu city. As we have seen with Hassan, the coalition of infrastructural, aesthetic, affective, and industrialising processes is not lost on Muslim butchers, who actively seek to retain their place and subjectivity in the culinary and commercial life of the city.

On this particular morning, meeting with regular acquaintances, I happened to pass by a middle-aged woman, Ruby, discussing her mutton order with a prominent butcher in the market who occupies five stalls and who supplies mutton, chicken, and fish, for both wholesale and retail. Entering the conversation, Ruby identified herself as a Christian from Colaba, a demographic considered among the old elite of South Mumbai. She was then in her early fifties and had lived her entire life in Mumbai. She had been purchasing both chicken and mutton from this very supplier for the past twenty years. Recently, she had reduced her red meat consumption and now orders her chicken home delivered from the nearby Colaba market. It was her son's birthday that day. She planned to celebrate by preparing his favourite mutton dish.

As we spoke, we were immersed in the activities of the market. Directly in front of us, a kasai (slaughterer) was carefully carving meat off a leg of lamb for her order. Nearby, the heavy thud of the steel butcher knife against a wooden chopping block signalled manual mince production. I wondered about her experience of being in the market that day,

> Here it is dirty, but at the end it is the best. It is smelly though! I was actually just thinking, I felt bad to cover my mouth you know, imagine I am covering, and they are working here?

The rhetorical force of Ruby's reflection situates her sense of disgust towards the "smelly" odours in the market, against her discomfort with showing signs of disgust towards her trusted supplier. Her comment on the smell of the market is an indication that the sensory encounter with animals and meat is for her not normalised as part of the culture of meat consumption in Mumbai, nor a sign of Muslim butcher abjection and disgust. But neither are the smells of the "dirty" market an unmediated encounter with animal life and death, beyond the discursive and embodied relations of trust, taste, and trade. She, as with countless others in the city, desire meat from Muslim butchers, in pursuit of freshness, skill, and taste. Aware of the way that Muslim butchering and meat handling are embedded in a politics of disgust in Hindu Nationalist and upper caste practice (Lee 2021). Ruby instead situates the unpleasant and "dirty" smell of the market, which she identifies as a form of livelihood (they are working here), as inseparable from an intimate but opaque trusting relationship with her butcher (they), towards whom a sign of disgust may constitute an offence. Her meta-pragmatic reflection on what signs of disgust may do in meat interactions with Muslim butchers in Mumbai indexes how qualisigns of taste, texture, and smell are here mediated by relations of space, trust, and trade; and reflexively embodied in ways that both reflect and

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deflect the circulations of disgust and disdain that turn around meat practice, space, and Muslim butchers in the city. The contested space of the city, where industrial production and urban cleansing aim to displace trades and markets deemed polluting and unpleasant, is a dialectical context for her reflexive ethics of embodied restraint and cultivated indifference to emerge.

The significance of Ruby's ethics of restraint and postured indifference is that it is an embodied act whereby the unpleasant affect of the "smelly" market is reflexively embodied as the refusal to cover her mouth, in consideration of what words, gestures, and actions do, in unequal and fraught relational contexts (Dave 2023). By not covering, Ruby establishes and maintains a relationship of trust and taste with her butcher, simultaneously asserting the value of his livelihood and presence in this space. Her commentary on meat quality, freshness, smell, dirt, livelihood, and personhood pushes back against the forces of development and abjection that circulate around Muslim bodies, trades, and ritual in Mumbai. As neoliberal development seeks to performatively inscribe a set of consumer aesthetics, sensations, roles, and subjects, it bypasses and seeks to capture alternative spaces, practices, and persons as sites of value, enregistering Muslim butchers and meat markets as the very antithesis of the world-class city. The significance of Ruby's reflexive embodiment of smell and disgust thus both emerges from the material and discursive circulation of disgust and disdain in meat interactions in Mumbai, and reveals this very context as a political-economic configuration with particular aims and interests, which she in practice does not embody nor align. Through the senses, she is both recruited into a politics of disgust and reflexively deflects and thus reveals that very process.

Disgust and disdain: affect, language, and reflexivity

Disgust and aversion in social interactions are important for tracking the way that embodied sensibilities shape everyday relations, spaces, and possibilities. From the colonial encounter (Roy 2010) to caste relations of hierarchy (Lee 2021), modern class distinctions, and Hindutva and Hindu Nationalist anti-Muslim abjection (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012), disgust and disdain have been central. Yet where much of this work trains attention to the way that structures of power and difference are mediated by disgust, this paper has turned to the reflexive, embodied, and intimate ways that disgust and disdain are embodied, expressed, and contained, in sometimes unpredictable ways. The reflexive embodiment of disgust and disdain is legible at the intersection of cultural and historical-political formations of professions, practical activities, identity, and ritual ideologies of occupation and ingestion, in ways that both presuppose and reveal these contested conditions of emergence.

In Mumbai, the field of meat, trust, taste, and quality in urban space, intersects with the contested nature of Islamic discourse embodied by Muslims in often disparate ways, and the increasingly neoliberal authoritarian context of making a world-class city (Patel, Parthasarathy, and Jose 2022). Expressions, evocations, and embodiments of disgust and disdain emerge from within the contested terrain of meat, Muslimness, caste, and halal in Mumbai and reveal the stakes of these contestations on the culinary, relational, spatial, and ethical life of the city. Ruby, a Christian woman, embodies a relation of recognition to her trusted Muslim butcher in ways that Irfan

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Bhai and the enquiring customer, as Muslims, do not. The reflexive embodiment of disgust and disdain, and the socialised ability to perform or construe them, constitute tools or affordances for relations of trade and exchange, revealing unlikely intimacies shaped and forged in practice.

Following Winfried Menninghaus (2003), we may recognise disgust as a form of rejection that "stands on the boundary between conscious patterns of conduct and unconscious impulses," in such a way that "brings eminent affective powers to bear" on matters of embodied, social, and political import (Menninghaus 2003, 3). The reflexive embodiment of disgust may thus offer insight into a critical "infrapolitics," as not simply an unmediated force, or a cultural peculiarity, but as a judgment of value, a "veridiction about the very terms of a relationship of power" (Stoler 2018, 212). We must thus pay much more attention to embodied movements and moments of aversion and repulsion, as well as the reflections of actors who situate, describe, mobilise, and contain these affects in situated ways.

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