RACISM AND EXCLUSION IN COUNCIL-SUPPORTED DIWALI EVENTS:

THE POLITICS OF FOOD AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES

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The Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

Prof Mohan J Dutta is the Director of CARE and author of books such as Neoliberal Health Organizing, Communicating Health, and Voices of Resistance.

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ABSTRACT

Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, is celebrated globally as a marker of cultural identity, community solidarity, and spiritual renewal. In Aotearoa New Zealand, council-supported Diwali events have become platforms for showcasing cultural diversity. However, the imposition of restrictions on non-vegetarian food at these events reveals deeper structures of racism and exclusion, rooted in cultural hegemonies of caste and exclusion, disenfranchising diverse minoritized Indian diaspora communities. This white paper employs the culture-centered approach (CCA) to interrogate how such restrictions marginalize communities, erase cultural diversity, and reinforce dominant narratives of purity and homogeneity. Drawing on a theoretical analysis that attends to the interplays of culture and structure in constructing identities around food within the broader context of caste in the Indian diaspora, the paper argues that these policies around surveilling and policing what food is delivered at religious-cultural events reflect communicative inversions that obscure structural racism under the guise of inclusivity. It proposes community-driven, participatory strategies to challenge these exclusions and re-center marginalized voices in shaping cultural celebrations, especially celebrations that are funded by the taxpayer.

INTRODUCTION

Diwali, celebrated by millions across the Indian diaspora, is a festival symbolizing the victory of light over darkness and good over evil. In Aotearoa New Zealand, public Diwali events, often supported by local councils, serve as sites of cultural expression and community-building. However, recent reports highlight instances where councils have imposed bans on non-vegetarian food at these events, citing "cultural sensitivity" or "inclusivity."[1] Such restrictions, while framed as neutral, erase the diverse culinary practices of Indian communities, particularly those from non-vegetarian traditions, and reflect deeper structures of racism and exclusion. Critical to note here is the cultural politics of caste that works through the policing of food to erase and marginalise oppressed caste, minority, and diverse linguistic communities.[2]

This white paper applies the culture-centered approach (CCA) to examine how these structural restrictions operate as mechanisms of marginalisation, disenfranchising diverse communities, excluding them from participatory spaces, and erasing their voices.[3] The CCA explores the interplays of culture and structure, delineating the structures that incorporate practices as normative, essentialising culture, while simultaneously excluding those that are constructed as the "other" of the cultural essence. It then foregrounds the critical role of listening in local, regional and national policy structures, suggesting the relevance for building spaces for listening to the voices of communities at the "margins of the margins."

The concept "margins of the margins" interrogates how structures—such as council policies (including multicultural and Welcoming Communities policies)—shape and reinforce hegemonic cultural meanings and simultaneously excluding subaltern groups.[4] By centering diverse articulations of culture and community from the margins, this paper critiques the hegemonic imposition of vegetarianism as a marker of "authentic" Indian culture and proposes participatory frameworks for inclusive cultural celebrations. The global rise of Hindutva-Hindi nexus that seeks to impose a monolithic monocultural narrative and parochial practices on diverse Hindu, Indian and South Asian communities further exacerbate the marginalising impact of Council-supported Diwali events that exclude meat. Finally, this white paper suggests that the practices of exclusion scripted into a cultural event positioned as multiculturalism, in upholding casteist practices and notions of purity,[5] perpetuate exclusion under the performance of multicultural inclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE CULTURE-CENTERED APPROACH

The culture-centered approach (CCA) posits that health, well-being, and cultural identity are co-constructed through dialogic interactions between communities and structures. Structures—such as local councils, media, and policy frameworks—shape access to resources and voice, often marginalizing communities through top-down impositions. In the context of Diwali events, council policies banning non-vegetarian food reflect a structural erasure of cultural diversity, rooted in casteist, colonial and neo-colonial tropes of purity and homogeneity. The casteist notions of cultural essence, built on notions of purity constructed by the Brahminical caste that exclude diverse oppressed caste communities, are further reinscribed by the rules around what food is to be served at Diwali events established by local Councils. In internalising and then imposing caste-based restrictions of food availability, local Councils serve as anchors to perpetuating caste-based exclusion.

The CCA emphasizes three key elements:

- **Structure**: The institutional and policy frameworks that shape resource distribution and cultural representation.
- **Culture**: The meanings, values, and practices through which communities articulate their identities.
- **Agency**: The capacity of communities to make sense of, negotiate, and transform oppressive structures.

This paper argues that council policies on Diwali events construct a monolithic "Hindu" identity, marginalizing non-vegetarian communities and reinforcing racialized hierarchies. In addition to the exclusions experienced by oppressed caste communities and minority religious communities, the diverse linguistic traditions and cultural practices across India that fall outside of the Hindi-Hindutva hegemony are further marginalised. For instance, Diwali is celebrated with meat, with various rituals around meat in other parts of India outside of the Hindi-Hindu regions and spaces. These diverse linguistic traditions, cultural practices, and rituals are marginalised as well when Council-funded Diwali celebrations impose a monolithic reading of culture.

The Politics of Food and Cultural Erasure

Food is a central marker of cultural identity, embodying histories, traditions, and social practices.[6] In the Indian diaspora, culinary practices are diverse, reflecting regional, caste, class, and religious differences.[7] While vegetarianism is significant in some Hindu traditions, non-vegetarian food is integral to many communities, including those from East India, Northeast India, South India, and minority groups such as Muslims, Christians, and Dalits within the diaspora.[8]

Council-imposed bans on non-vegetarian food at Diwali events erase these diverse practices, imposing a singular narrative of "Hindu purity" rooted in upper-caste, Brahminical ideologies.[9] This reflects a form of cultural Hindutva, a nationalist ideology that asserts Hindu supremacy through homogenized cultural forms.[10] Such policies align with global Hindutva narratives that marginalize minority and lower-caste communities by framing non-vegetarianism as "impure" or "un-Hindu."[11]

Moreover, these restrictions mirror broader patterns of racism in Aotearoa New Zealand, where cultural diversity is managed through neoliberal frameworks that prioritize "safe" and "palatable" expressions of ethnicity, upholding a settler colonial construction of migrant communities as cultural essence. The Council's construction of Diwali as a monocultural event perpetuates the historic colonial divide-and-rule strategy that constructs diverse cultures as reflections of manageable cultural essence.[12] By banning non-vegetarian food, councils exclude communities whose identities are tied to these culinary practices, reinforcing a racialized hierarchy that privileges dominant groups while silencing others. To legitimize their decision-making, Councils often construct community advisory groups, drawing up opaque and inaccessible processes through which they select specific community organizations to advise them on the norms, management, and implementation of Diwali. These groups often represent hegemonic organizational structures and norms within the Indian diaspora, often drawn from within upper caste groups that are designated as the representatives of the community. When caste oppressed and diverse community groups raise complains about the discriminatory nature of practices such as food policing and surveillance, with deep ties to the disenfranchising structures of caste, Councils turn to the narrative architecture of dominant advisory groups to suppress conversation and avoid critical interrogation.[13]

Communicative Inversions and Structural Racism

The imposition of non-vegetarian food bans operates as a communicative inversion, where exclusionary practices are framed as inclusive. Councils often justify these policies as promoting "community harmony" or respecting "religious sentiments." However, this rhetoric obscures the structural racism embedded in privileging one cultural narrative over others. By aligning with upper-caste vegetarian norms, councils reinforce colonial legacies that homogenize Indian identity, erasing the diversity of subaltern communities.

This inversion aligns with broader patterns of whiteness in Aotearoa New Zealand, where multicultural policies often serve to manage and contain difference rather than amplify marginalized voices.[14] The exclusion of non-vegetarian food at Diwali events reflects a neoliberal approach to diversity, where cultural expressions are sanitized to align with dominant sensibilities, marginalizing communities that challenge these norms.

Case Study: Media and Policy Narratives

Media reports and policy documents further illustrate these dynamics. In 2025, a council-supported Diwali event in Auckland banned non-vegetarian food, citing "respect for cultural traditions".[15] This decision sparked backlash from community groups, who argued that it erased their culinary practices. The New Zealand Herald reported on the controversy, noting that the council's decision was influenced by lobbying from Hindu nationalist groups advocating vegetarianism as a marker of Hindu identity.

This case reflects how councils, under pressure from dominant groups, reproduce exclusionary narratives. The influence of Hindutva-aligned organizations in shaping these policies highlights the global circulation of nationalist ideologies that marginalize minority voices within the diaspora.

RECOMMENDATIONS: CO-CREATING INCLUSIVE CULTURAL SPACES

The CCA emphasizes participatory strategies to challenge oppressive structures. Based on community dialogues and CARE's fieldwork, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Community-led event planning: Councils should establish advisory boards comprising diverse members of the Indian diaspora, including oppressed caste, minority, and non-vegetarian communities, to co-create Diwali event policies. The CCA offers a community engagement framework anchored in the concept "margins of the margins," critically reflecting on the following questions: Which voices are not present here? How do we invite these voices in? This ensures that cultural representations reflect community diversity, particularly in the context of hierarchies of discrimination within casteist Hindu structures, rather than relying on dominant narratives that are convenient and easily accessible. Given the extreme power inequalities in the Indian religious-cultural spaces, it is critical that such in forming advisory groups, Councils pay close attention to the workings of communicative inequality, power, and participatory opportunities. Using some markers such as age, linguistic or gender diversity, without engaging seriously questions of caste, is likely to perpetuate the caste discriminatory practices.

2. Building dialogic spaces: Create forums for community members to voice their experiences of exclusion and negotiate cultural meanings. These spaces should prioritize subaltern voices, including those of Dalits, Muslims, and regional minorities.

3. Creating policy transparency: Councils must publicly justify food-related policies, engaging with community feedback to address concerns of exclusion. Transparency counters communicative inversions by making decision-making processes accountable. Existing systems disenfranchise through bureaucratic layers that are not visible, particularly to communities at the margins. Working to make the consultation, participation and planning processes transparent is a critical element in addressing discrimination perpetuated within diverse communities through practices upheld by the Council.

4. Creating cultural education: Develop educational campaigns to highlight the diversity of Diwali celebrations, challenging stereotypes of a monolithic "Hindu" identity. These campaigns can be co-created with community organizations to amplify marginalized voices. It is also salient to build the spaces for counter-narrative that challenge the cultural essentialism and cultural nationalism of Hindutva.

5. Resisting Hindutva narratives: Councils should critically examine lobbying efforts by nationalist groups and prioritize inclusive policies that reflect the pluralistic nature of the Indian diaspora.

6. Critically examining funding priorities: Councils should closely interrogate the funding of Diwali as a cultural event: As noted in this analysis, Diwali is a religious event that is marked with deep inequalities around who gets to participate and who is excluded from participatory spaces. Councils have critical roles to play in examining closely the role of religion in democracy, the relationship between religion and policy structures, and their roles in promoting equity. Given the rise of Hindutva in Aotearoa and the growth in the representation of the Indian community, it is critical that Councils closely consider funding of similar other religious events that reflect the diverse religious traditions of the sub-continent. For instance, for Dalits (oppressed caste communities), Buddha Purnima, and the birth anniversary of B R Ambedkar form critical registers in challenging caste oppression. The funding for Diwali must be located in conversation with the funding for these and other similar events.

CONCLUSION

The prohibition of non-vegetarian food at council-supported Diwali events in Aotearoa New Zealand reflects deeper structures of racism and exclusion, rooted in cultural hegemonies and neoliberal diversity management. Through the lens of the culture-centered approach, this white paper highlights how such policies erase diverse culinary practices, marginalize subaltern communities, and reinforce dominant narratives of purity and homogeneity. By centering community voices and proposing participatory strategies, we advocate for transformative practices that reimagine Diwali as a truly inclusive celebration of cultural diversity. The challenge lies in dismantling communicative inversions and co-creating spaces where marginalized voices shape the cultural narrative.

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[13] See for instance the response of a Council to an OIA: The BNZ Auckland Diwali Festival food stalls - a Official Information Act request to Auckland Council - FYI

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