

RACISM AND EXCLUSION IN GOVERNMENT-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.

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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, with rows of lamps dispelling darkness, the victory of light over darkness, prosperity over poverty, and good over evil. Across different regions and religious sects of India, Diwali holds different meanings, with the worship of different deities and in some contexts, intertwined with different agrarian traditions. The liberatory story of Diwali follows different cultural registers based on the particularities of the religious tradition, including the different cultural practices for instance of the Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta traditions. In Aotearoa New Zealand, public Diwali events, often supported by local councils as well as other government bodies (such as Ministry for Ethnic Communities), 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 deep layers of marginalisation. The violence of discrimination perpetuated by caste under the guise of multiculturalism further reifies the erasure of those communities at the “margins of the margins.” The lack of cultural knowledge around caste in council structures and the inability to critically listen to voices from within diverse communities, treating diverse communities as monoliths, disenfranchises those within communities who have historically experienced multiple layers of discrimination, with their lived experiences accounting for discrimination continually silenced by upper caste (mostly Brahmin) gatekeepers of communities.

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 Brahminical power 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.⁶ In internalising and then imposing caste-based restrictions of food availability, local Councils serve as anchors to perpetuating caste-based exclusion and racial discrimination. It is critical to note at the onset of the paper that caste is one of the oldest and most entrenched forms of racism, violently experienced by those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy or those excluded from the hierarchy (marked as the “outside” of it).⁷ The construction of caste as passed through birth magnifies manifold the exclusions and marginalization perpetuated by caste.

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.⁸ 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.⁹ In the Indian diaspora, culinary practices are diverse, reflecting regional, caste, class, and religious differences.¹⁰ 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, Adivasis, and Dalits within the diaspora.¹¹

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 ideology.¹² This reflects a form of cultural Hindutva, a nationalist ideology that asserts Hindu supremacy through homogenized cultural forms.¹³ Such policies align with global Hindutva narratives that marginalize minority and lower-caste communities by framing non-vegetarianism as “impure” or “un-Hindu.”¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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. 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 complaints 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.¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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

In-depth interviews conducted by our research team with diverse diaspora Indian communities (with focus on listening to the voices of the margins of the diaspora), official information requests filed by the author, media reports and policy documents further illustrate these dynamics. Multiple council-supported Diwali events in different cities have banned non-vegetarian food, citing “respect for cultural traditions. This decision has raised concerns from diverse community groups, who argue that it erases their culinary practices.

The Diwali event organised by the Wellington Mutamizh Sangam serves both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, with organisers noting that vegetarian and non-vegetarian food were prepared separately to prevent contamination. The Hindu Council of New Zealand objected to the serving of meat by the Sangam, noting that this practice went against “core Hindu values.” The media reported on the controversy, noting the voices of community leaders advocating vegetarianism as a marker of Hindu identity, without engaging critically with questions of caste, purity and vegetarianism. The Stuff article referenced in this paper noted the following:

[Hindu Council of New Zealand's](#) president Vijeshni Rattan said no meat should be served if organisers used the word “Diwali” to promote the event.

“We want to spread awareness that it is a cultural and religious festival. They [people who serve non-vegetarian food] are going against core Hindu values.”

[Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin](#) president Pushpa Wood said she was “quite upset”.

“I've been in this country [New Zealand] for 44 years now and this is first time I felt that my festival is being kind of hijacked from me.

“We have traditionally never served meat on Diwali. Over the years what has happened is what started out as being celebrated as a religious festival has become more like a commercial festival.

“I find it ironic that I can explain those sentiments and get respect from Europeans and non-Hindus who respect my belief system than to some Hindus who cannot understand why I'm being so fussy.”

Note here the role played by the Hindutva-linked organisation, the Hindu Council, in serving as a gatekeeper of what Hinduism is, a strategy that is deployed by Hindutva to cast a monolithic narrative of Hinduism. This monolithic interpretation of Hinduism is embedded in Brahminism and caste hierarchy, with the politics of food purity determining who is included and who is excluded.

The article then goes on to quote the Wellington Mutamizh Sangam president Karuna Muthu,

“Deepavali [Diwali] is a celebration of light triumphing over darkness. The darkness of religious zeal is not the Hindu spirit. Hinduism is a way of life. The brand of Hinduism practiced in the state of Tamil Nadu is markedly different to the one followed in the rest of India.

“You don't need to be a vegetarian to be a Hindu. You don't need to be a Hindu to be a Tamil. You don't need to be an Indian to celebrate Deepavali.”

Quoting the organization's Vice-President Raveen Annamalia, the article noted:

“It is the Hindu Council that is getting sensitive over this matter.”

“They are not a registration body in this country to control. We are a secular country. We respect everybody.”

“Today they are saying you don't eat meat. Tomorrow they say non-vegetarians can't enter temples.”

Further observe that the Hindu Council's narrative conflates religion and culture, reproducing a discriminatory climate around food. Similarly, note the framing by Pushpa Wood of Diwali becoming a commercial event, which suggests that the serving of meat in Diwali is somehow a contemporary response to market demands and erasing the deep history of caste politics and diverse communities in Hindu traditions that celebrate Diwali by eating meat. The articulation that Wood's version of what makes Diwali should take precedence over the beliefs of diverse Hindu communities captures the politics of power, control and erasure in upper caste construction of religious celebration. The broader context of caste politics within which the gatekeeping around food is located is erased from the broader discussion in the media story.

This case reflects how councils and other related government bodies, 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. **Building anti-racist community events:** Recognizing that the imposition of vegetarianism in community events funded by Councils and other related government bodies (such as the Ministry for Ethnic Communities) perpetuates the racist hierarchy of caste is a critical starting point in building anti-racist community events that are invitational, dialogic, and inclusive, Council-funded events that promote vegetarian only Diwali celebrations are co-opted into perpetuating a racist ideology by preventing non-vegetarian food from being sold at Diwali events.
2. **Building inclusion:** Taxpayer-funded Diwali events should not be projected as supporting a cultural activity that is presented by the Hindu Council as a religious activity. If indeed, as the Hindu Council conceptualizes it, Diwali is presented as a religious activity, constructed within a narrow framing of the religion (Hinduism), local government (councils) should not be funding it. The conflation of culture and religion is a critical strategy deployed by Hindutva. On one hand, it positions events as cultural to attract multicultural funding allocated for diversity and inclusion; on the other hand, it then imposes a monolithic reading of culture based on monolithic religion that excludes (in this case, Adivasis, Dalits and diverse linguistic communities). Council funding should be allocated to events and celebrations that are secular and inclusive rather than to events that exclude and perpetuate the marginalization of communities based on one of the oldest form of racism, caste.
3. **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 cultural events that are inclusive and invitational. I note here that Diwali is a religious (Hindu) event and ask whether there are other events that are Council supported that reflect the religious pluralism of South Asia. With the growing diversity of South Asian communities in Aotearoa, it is worthwhile for Councils, through community participation that listens to diverse voices of South Asians to look beyond Diwali to imagine a festival of South Asia where diverse South Asian cultures and communities feel represented and included. In imagining such an event, it is particularly worthwhile to attend to the richness of those South Asian cultures that are often unheard. 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.
4. **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.

5. **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.
6. **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.
7. **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. As noted by the [Wellington Mutamizh Sangam](#), they should prevent Council supported events from being co-opted and defined by Hindutva linked organizations that reproduce a monolithic construction of Hinduism to perpetuate erasure and marginalization.
8. **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, especially when the codes of Diwali are established in Brahminical norms. 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,²⁰ 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, challenging the gatekeeping of Diwali by Hindutva organizations, and co-creating spaces where marginalized voices shape the cultural narrative.

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