

Not just a religious issue

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While politicians quibble over the legality of the recent rules issued by the Central government curbing the movement and trade in cattle of all types and even camels, we may like to take a look at the big picture. The oft-quoted Article 48 of the Constitution is one among the many unrealized directive principles: desirable when able. It talks of banning the slaughter of milch and draught cattle, but the point here is that no one is advocating this patently uneconomical idea. We need to understand that even the best cows become a burden to poor farmers after their lactating period is over. So do old draught animals. Most farmers, many of whom are strict vegetarians, therefore, sell them off so that other humans and cattle can be better looked after.

One needs to consider the impact of stopping or restricting these sales on the economics of the milk industry. For instance, Gujarat's cooperative milk federation alone has 36 lakh milk farmer-members and also caters to countless more. The past sadly whispers that every time the government takes such "gigantic steps" to tinker with the economy, it has to step in soon with a new subsidy scheme, that forces more taxes on those who pay. The enforcement of one's own values or political agenda on hapless fellow-Indians can succeed up to a point, especially at the hustings, but then someone has to pay.

Twenty-four states have already legislated under their powers drawn from Entry 15 of the State List and most have banned cow slaughter. Only Kerala, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim permit the slaughter of non-milch cows and old draught animals. As most states are in the Northeast, is it wise for a responsible Centre to alienate them even more, by determining what they should eat? The longest road bridge alone cannot cover the emotional chasm that exists and many nurse a lot of pain and alienation from the entity they call 'India', where they are beaten up, periodically. It is best not to forget that several in this region had taken to arms and it took superhuman effort and a lot of lives to bring in normalcy. India is a multi-cultural federation that has worked so long because the delicate balance was respected.

Each culture has the right to choose its own values and even its special animal, although few go to the extent of venerating it as in India. We have to understand that abhorrence for beef was the prime 'cultural trench' that insulated Hindus from Islamic power and influence for half a millennium. But then, it is insane to kill fellow humans to emphasize the love for *go-mata* and impose a narrow version of a historically tolerant religion. The vigilantes get away only because of the indulgence of *Hindutva*-professing governments. Many noticed the unusual silence of the great and over-articulate leader on this terrible business of outsourced terror. But the brazenness with which the Centre sanctified the encroachment into dietary preferences can only be the harbinger of more to come.

The votaries of 'Hindi Hindu Hindustan' overlook the fact that most of India lies beyond it and will remain different. We may choose to discount Ambedkar's well researched facts on the prevalence

of beef in Indian culture or even a historian like D.N. Jha. We may dismiss the beef-eating habits of the torch-bearers of Sanskrit culture in the Vedic age as lies or aberrations. But how can we deny that large sections of confirmed Hindus still eat beef? Estimates vary and even the Central government's own National Sample Survey Office round of 2011-12 estimated that 1.25 crore Hindus ate beef, which is obviously an understatement. In several anti-Brahmanical cultures, like the 'real Dravidian' ones and in many counter-cultures all over India, socially-oppressed communities not only eat beef, but organize public beef-eating events to assert their autonomy. All Hindu beef-eaters cannot be branded pejoratively as 'low', because this survey revealed that nearly 30 per cent do not fall in that insulting category. In fact, over 7 per cent were actually from the so-called 'upper castes' and surprisingly, only 40 per cent of Muslims and 25 per cent of Christians mentioned that they ate beef. While the NSSO's projections imply that some 4.4 lakh tons of cattle meat was consumed in India, international statistics estimate that local consumption was approximately 22 lakh tons. India also exported an estimated 24 lakh tons and it is doubtful whether these large numbers are understood by demon-izers.

In 2015, India was the world's largest exporter of bovine meat ahead of its competitors, Brazil and Australia-New Zealand. This was possible because a lot of Indians do not touch it and Indian meat exports gave us more than \$5 billion or Rs 34,000 crore. It may be sensible to factor some hard economics into this emotional debate. After all, we strain every nerve to balance our adverse foreign trade account and then fail to make ends meet. We are home to the world's largest buffalo population and its sacrifice was (and still is) religiously sanctified during the worship of the warrior goddess. Only the naive believe that once the goddess was propitiated, the buffalo carcasses were left for animals to devour. In fact, we need to be grateful to those who flay these carcasses, as it is certainly not a pleasant job. Instead, sponsored goons are let loose to thrash the flayers. In July 2016, a video of vigilantes beating quite mercilessly four carcass-flayers in the model state of Gujarat went viral and the Dalit community struck work, leaving dead cattle unattended. The public health crisis that led to immediate appeasement should be an eye-opener to those who preach irresponsible *Hindutva*.

Experts estimate India's cattle population to be some 25 crore in number and state that the number is stable as it replenishes itself. Every year, 4 per cent dies natural deaths and another estimated 4 per cent is slaughtered. But while there are some 1,600 registered slaughter houses, the unregistered ones are many times more. Hygiene is a severe problem and in some northern states, licences are arbitrarily suspended by municipalities in deference to 'sentiments'. We must realize that every twist and turn in this legal-illegal game usually results in huge bribes to inspectors, *babus* and politicians. The byproduct of meat, leather, gave us more in exports: \$6.5 billion or Rs 45,000 crore. But the bad news for 25 lakh people who are directly involved is that exports fell by 10 per cent in the last financial year. Then, we have another Rs 40,000 to 48,000 crore in our domestic leather manufacture and trade. The high decibel 'Make in India' campaign may like to consider these numbers as this industry is being choked, for votes.

Those who really love the cow could begin by taking good care of aged cattle, after giving the farmers their dues. Finally, could not the preachers take up immediately, through their *shakhas* and *bhakts*, a campaign not to touch leather shoes, bags and belts, as these come from cows?