

Beyond ‘Holiness’: Medieval Accounts of the Ecological Cow

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The Supreme Court, in its judgment on 26 October 2005 said- ‘There is no escape from the conclusion that the protection conferred by impugned enactment on cow progeny is needed in the interest of Nation’s economy. Merely because it may cause ‘inconvenience’ or some ‘dislocation’ to the butchers, restriction imposed by the impugned enactment does not cease to be in the interest of the general public. The former must yield to the latter.’¹ However, academic debate on the issue continues to grow. Many progressive social scientists often associate eating beef with the culture of the poor and downtrodden as it provides the required protein to them and is more economical. On the other hand, there are many who associate cow with religious faith, age-old belief and sentiments of the Hindus. But beyond these two ideological assertions, the issue needs serious consideration on grounds of ecology. Surprisingly, the modern discourse on cow slaughter hinges on religious and cultural belief, whereas most of the early accounts hint towards an economic and ecological sensitivity. The earliest modern scholar to have drawn our attention to understand the economic-ecological framework of cattle was Marvin Harris in 1966, who in his paper “The Cultural Ecology of India’s sacred Cattle”, demonstrated the milk benefits along with agricultural benefit. He argued that the belief and practices associated with cow veneration helped to motivate the conservation of cattle. Since ox and humped bull was the only source of energy in pre-modern times, those who lacked it could feel the shortage of food. Harris was, however, criticized by many scientists doing empirical study of Indian regions, who saw the poor environmental condition, as crucial evidence to suggest that Hindu cow managers’ ‘cultural ecology’ was not economically correct. They argued that non-killing of cows posed a burden on limited human resources. It led to growth of large cattle population creating an ecological imbalance. Garrett Hardin in his 1968 article took a position of abandoning the commons in breeding as freedom to breed brings ruin to all. In his “Tragedy of the Commons” he persuasively argued that such economically irrational decision-making of individuals could have grave environmental repercussions. He pointed out that if individuals in a group use common resources for their own gain and with no regard for others, all resources would eventually be depleted. Hardin believed that negative environmental conditions were not essentially proof of a lack of economic rationality, rather irrationality. His broader proposition was that conscience or morality may not be possible when there is economic gain, and may

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lead ‘increase in anxiety’ eventually. His thesis got support from many western scientists and social scientists, which saw excess cow population in competition with ‘misery of overpopulation’ as both humans and cattle are part of same ecosystem. In a medieval society, however, wherein under the Delhi Sultans and the Mughals new lands were being brought into cultivation everyday, cultivation was not possible only through human labour and it needed bull power. Unlike Europe, where pastureland was available only for few months due to extreme winter, India had long period of breaks between two crops on a land that was huge enough for cattle to feed. The humped bull also gave a natural advantage along with two cropping seasons, which the cultivators never wanted to lose. Looking from the glass of medieval sources it may also be suggested that the cattle owners adopted sacred cow technique to take economic advantage through bull and oxen to plough the flat alluvial plain of the Ganga basin. To understand this proposition we need to look at the gradual transition from secular to sacred belief of cow.

Evidence of beef eating comes from ancient times with historians using the reference to *gosava* (cow sacrifice) during *Rajsuya* and *Vajpeya yagya* (Jha, 2004). However, gradually cow went on to become a priceless possession, and so it began to be revered to the extent of assuming the status of ‘holiness’. Cows began to be treated as valuable property that is why in the Rigveda terms such as *gopati* (tribal chief), *gomat* (wealthy person), *gavisthi* or *gavesana* (battle for possession of cows), *duhitri* (one who milks cows i.e. daughter) are often used. There is every reason to believe that beef eating became exceptional as the communities began to realize cow’s economic potential. After the emergence of Gautam Buddh and the popularity of Buddhism, one of the prime issues of appeal was the protection of cattle wealth, which was needed for the agricultural economy. From here on Brahminism, in tune with the need of the times, too converted itself from cattle sacrifice advocator to cattle protector. *Shatpatha Brahmana* denounced slaughter of cow as it supports everything on earth.

The fact that cattle slaughter continued despite an informal understanding of not killing the cattle lead historians to argue that beef eating was a common accepted reality. There are certain inscriptional accounts, which suggest that state took measures to check animal killing, but nowhere do they explain the logic behind such orders. One such evidence comes from the Asokan Pillar Edict V, where the emperor (269-232 BCE) prohibited the slaughter of many animals, but cows and calves are absent from his list. Later scriptures such as *Manusmriti* though attach the profession of killing of animals to the outcastes, but nowhere does it mention cow-slaughter as part of this practice. So, the possible reason for few prohibitory orders could have been their ecological and economic significance. In most of the

modern discourse the element of ‘rationale’ has taken a back seat. We tend to forget that the ancient pronouncements against cow slaughter were based on reason, which took the form of blind faith based on assertion.

The ecological and economic significance of cattle might did not die even after the penetration of the Turkic culture, which was more pastoral in character in early years. The Turks came from an area where agricultural land was scarce, and they had to depend a lot on animal food. So cow or any cattle available to them was part of their eating habit. After the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate a large number of Turks and non-Turks migrated to India, and the economic reason associated with cattle seems to have been disoriented to an extent, but not among the agricultural communities. The eleventh century scholar, Alberuni highlights the economic factor associated with non-killing of cows in India at that time (Alberuni, 2012). At the same time, however, he mentions that the shudras used to eat cattle along with many other animals. It may be argued that since the shudras were disassociated from land holdings, the economic worth of cattle might not have induced their eating habit. The medieval Sanskrit sources are therefore replete with derogatory terms like *mlecchas* for those who kill cow.

By the early fourteenth century state interference in non-killing of cow became more pronounced. Ibn Battuta, who travelled to India at that time, mentions the cases of reaction to cow slaughter by the Muslims, who were burnt alive by the Hindus wrapped in skins of the slaughtered animals (Alam, 1989). These Hindus must have been the peasants who regarded cow as an important element in maintaining rural ecological equilibrium. Similarly, Abdur Razzaq while visiting Calicut in 1442-43 observed that killing a cow and eating beef was considered a heinous crime, and the person doing the sin was immediately put to death (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2007). The vernacular sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries often refer to beef as something, which disturbs the Hindu populace. Many a times, the Islamic rulers used this restraint of a Hindu populace to exploit the situation as part of their war strategy. *Kanhadade Prabandha* of Padmanabha written in 1455 gives reference to Ala al-Din Khalaji’s army throwing the body of a cow into the pond of the Jalore fort with the help of a mechanical device *fakri*. The ruler of Jalore, Kanhadade was not ready to give in and the fort was seized from outside by Khalaji forces. The intelligence had informed the invaders that Jalore had enough food and water stored inside, so they decided to throw the cow-flesh into the only source of water supply inside the fort. Barring such moments when everything was fair in war, the Islamic rulers were very careful about the cow-slaughter issue.

The Mughals, who were more considerate towards the majority community, never disturbed the age-old tradition of cow reverence. None of the accounts of Akbar mention any cow slaughter activity in open place. Ralph Fitch who remained in

India between 1583-1591, and William Finch who travelled across between 1608-11, often mention that cow was so revered in India that many ceremonies were attached to the cow. The East Indian Company agent William Finch gives one instance wherein an Englishman Thomas Tucker had killed a calf under the influence of alcohol and this led to riot like situation (Foster, 133). Even Jahangir, who was fond of hunting and killing animals, never killed any cow. His memoir, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, gives a lot of account of his many months hunting spree. Among the various animals killed by Jahangir during the journey sheep, goat, wild ass, nilgai, antelope, chikara, tiger etc. are mentioned, but nowhere does it state that cow has been killed. Jahangir in fact issued an order to forbid the killing of cows and beasts of pastures. Although Pelsaert has mentioned that Akbar and Jahangir discouraged cow-slaughter due to administrative reasons, but other contemporary accounts hint towards the ecological intent behind such measure. Akbar and Jahangir forbade all kinds of animal slaughter on certain days in the week and during certain periods in a year. Even the bitter critic of emperor Akbar, Badauni wrote that 'God puts a curse on him who slaughters a cow, cuts down a tree and sells human being' (Habib, 2010). During the reign of Aurangzeb people urged the ruler to put a ban on killing of cattle as much part of cultivable land had been facing paucity of oxen. To all these early modern rulers cow was more than a holy animal. They prohibited its killing because they understood its economic and ecological repercussion.

Francois Bernier, who was a French physician and traveller, wrote his travel account based on his own observations during his 12 years stay in India between 1656-1668. He very categorically underlined the ecological aspect of cow killing. Cow and peacock have had a 'peculiar respect', wrote Bernier. He explained that this 'superior regard' for the cow was so high 'owing to her extraordinary usefulness, as being the animal which supplies them with milk and butter' (Bernier, 326). It was also revered because of being 'source of husbandry' and therefore, the 'preserver of life itself'. Bernier also observed that people understood the deficiency of pastureland in India, which does not allow a large number of cattle to maintain. Unlike the cattle killing practice of France and England, he writes, people in India very well knew that the entire cattle population would soon disappear if animal food were eaten in huge proportion. The scarcity of cattle would also force the peasants to leave the land uncultivated.

Certainly, morals and economics were not disconnected in this tradition. Medieval sources indicate that cow was perceived more of an economic and ecological resource rather than just as an identity attached to the Hindus who considered it as sacred. Yet social scientists prefer to focus more on religious belief, holiness or no-holiness and myth, and not on the idea whether beliefs and myths were the outcome of economic decision and its motivated behavior. As practitioner of environmental

history I am not arguing that cow reverence was a monolithic rational economic decision, but medieval Indian environment might have got enriched through the mythical policing. It could have been a conscious ecological ideology in medieval times. That is why the animals earlier sacrificed to the Gods were being perceived as too valuable to be killed in medieval society. In a modern scenario, however, the 'holiness' of the cow has led to practical problems. We often see the old and useless bulls and cows left in the open to roam around for food, as they become an economic burden for the cultivator with little land left in the village common for grazing. The total cultivable and pastureland is shrinking at the cost of development, and the state needs to find a solution out of these mutually exclusive issues of sensitive sacredness and resource scarcity.

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¹https://archive.org/stream/SC_judgement_on_cow_slaughtering_2005_india/Supreme%20Court%20Judgement%20on%20GOHATYA_djvu.txt, accessed on 05 October, 2015.