

Cow-Beef, Religious Minorities-Dalits and Political Games

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Too many incidents of atrocities against Dalits-Muslims have been making headlines during last two years. Some of these like the one of Una (Gujarat, July 2016) have shaken the conscience of sensitive citizens of the country. This one came on the back of the lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq (Dadri, UP June 2015) on the ground of killing a calf and eating beef.

A brief recap of Una incident is in order. On 11th July (2016) in a village of Una taluka in Gujarat the cow vigilantes beat up the members of Dalit family who were skinning the dead cow. The cow had been killed by a lion. The cow vigilantes dragged four Dalits, tied them to a SUV, dragged them to Una town and in front of a police station stripped them above the vest and mercilessly beat them. ⁽¹⁾ To add salt to the injury they videotaped the whole incident and circulated it. This enraged the Dalit community who started the spontaneous protest and refused to bury the dead cows. They took the carcass of dead animals and put them in front of Collector's offices. Nearly thirty youth tried to commit suicide. There was a massive mobilization of the Dalits all over the state where they resolved that they will not handle the dead animals from now on with the rider that those who regard Cow as their mother should do the last rites of *their mother*. This is coming up as one of the major social protest movements.

While some BJP leaders criticized it, some justified and Modi kept silent on it for three long weeks letting the polarization deepen. One BJP MP Hukum Singh said that those criticizing BJP do not understand the pain of those for whom cow is like mother.

While today Narendra Modi seems to be giving a message that 80% so called Gau Rakshaks are anti social elements, same Modi had used this issue as a polarizing factor in 2014 elections. One just has to recall his speech in the wake of 2014 elections and one may become clear about the reason for his silence. Mr. Modi had stated "Rana Pratap dedicated his life to *gau raksha* (cow protection). He fought wars and sacrificed young men to protect the cow..." He derogatorily referred to export of beef as Pink revolution and criticized the same. He also accused that if Congress comes to power and for the sake of beef export cows will be slaughtered. ⁽²⁾

In the present hysterical atmosphere which is gradually intensifying around 'Mother cow', one has to remember an incident just over a decade ago (2002) in Dulina village of Jhajjar in Haryana. A mob of over a thousand people lynched five Dalits who were skinning a dead cow to sell the hide. In the context of Dulina lynching of five Dalits; VHP's Acharya Giriraj Kishore in a press conference stated that "the life of a cow is more precious than that of a human being." The recent incidents are just the tip hiding the intense atmosphere of *Hate* being created around this issue. A few months ago in

Malegaon Maharashtra police arrested three Muslims on the charge of storing beef. A little later after Dadri incident came the news of burning of a truck in Aurangabad alleged to be carrying beef. Such incidents are dime a dozen in recent times. What has happened lately is that such cow related violence has intensified as Cow vigilantes know that the Central Government and many BJP ruled state Governments are sympathetic to them.

At the same time two other incidents have come to light. One is that in the BJP ruled Rajasthan for the first time a 'cow ministry' with a minister in-charge has been created. In the same state in one of the Gaushalas (Cow protection shed) in Hingonia; hundreds of cows died due to the neglect of the state machinery. Since the time BJP has come to power the export of beef has gone up and India has become one of the major exporters of beef in the World. At the same time what has been reported is that since the BJP came to power the budget of grant meant for upkeep of cow shelters has been drastically reduced by the BJP led NDA. ⁽³⁾

This is quite a complex scenario. This is forcing us to think as to what is precisely going on? It is true that there are some Constitutional provisions for preservation of Cow progeny. "After much debate and deliberation in the Constituent Assembly and a demand from a few members of the assembly, to include a total ban on the slaughter of cows as part of fundamental rights in the Indian Constitution, a compromise was reached and the protection of the revered bovine found place in the Directive Principles of state policy, which incorporates this Hindu sentiment in a somewhat guarded and hesitant form." ⁽⁴⁾

It is to be recalled that this was couched in the secular language, 'Organization of agriculture and animal husbandry: The State shall Endeavour to organize agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle'.

As such twenty four states in India are already having some sort of a law either prohibiting or limiting the slaughter of cows and other cattle, it is the more recent draconian acts passed by states like Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and more recently Maharashtra in 2015, criminalizing cow slaughter as a non-bailable offence, that need to be revisited and studied in terms of their constitutionality and of their being violative of the fundamental rights of certain groups of people in the country and being against the very secular spirit of the Indian Constitution. ⁽⁵⁾

We do realize that this is one among the many Constitutional provision like reduction of the income disparities, protection of environment among others. The one related to cow protection is being cited more often and more aggressively by communal organizations. They are impervious to the context of the needs of agrarian economy and

food habits of the religious minorities, Dalits and Adivasis. One recalls that Rohith Vemula who was forced to commit suicide had participated in the beef festival in solidarity with those consuming beef or dealing with Cow as a part of economic activity. ⁽⁶⁾

It is clear that on one hand the budget for cow shelters has been cut down, on the other the Cow shelters have been neglected despite creating Cow ministries and yet at another level the violence has been instigated against Muslims and Dalits in the name of cow.

‘Cow as mother’ is has now become the major tool in the hands of communal forces. As such ‘Cow as mother’ was the ploy used by Hindu communalism all through from late nineteenth century. At that time, there was a matching slogan of ‘pig as an object of hate’ from Muslim communalism on the battleground. As classic serial Tamas (Bhism Sanhi) showed the use of pig to be thrown in a mosque to instigate the riots; was running parallel to beef in the temple, such incidents leading to communal violence and boosting communal politics in turn.

After independence the ‘pig in the mosque’ is heard of less often. Occasionally one did hear of beef in the temple being put in by Bajrang Dal elements. ⁽⁷⁾ But not too many casualties were heard on this ground. On subconscious level the issue of beef has been kept very much alive and now it has been made more important one as far as communal polarization is concerned. This is keeping in mind the electoral arithmetic. It has added to the worsening scenario as far as communal harmony is concerned.

Talking at economic level cow has been an important part of the agricultural economy. The old bullocks and cows being used for food by large sections of society has been the norm. Apart from Adivasis, sections of Dalits, Muslims, Christians and even upper caste Hindus consumed beef, as a cheap and rich source of protein. Being a large country with big cattle strength, India is also one of the major exporters of beef.

Historically; it is interesting to note that beef was part of food habits from Vedic times. Cow got transformed in to mother hood and a major tool of identity politics later. Bhimrao Ambedkar in his celebrated essay “Did Hindus never eat beef?” demonstrates this very well. At popular level Swami Vivekananda confirms the findings of historians like Prof D.N.Jha, who traces the history of beef consumption in Vedic times. Swamiji points out, “You will be astonished if I tell you that, according to old ceremonials, he is not a good Hindu who does not eat beef. On certain occasions he must sacrifice a bull and eat it.” ⁽⁸⁾

This is corroborated by other research works sponsored by the Ramakrishna Mission established by Swami Vivekananda himself. One of these reads: “The Vedic Aryans, including the Brahmans, ate fish, meat and even beef. A distinguished guest was

honored with beef served at a meal. Although the Vedic Aryans ate beef, milch cows were not killed. One of the words that designated cow was aghnya (what shall not be killed). But a guest was a goghna (one for whom a cow is killed). It is only bulls, barren cows and calves that were killed.”⁽⁹⁾

It is not that society cannot resolve the issue of contrasting food habits and faith in an amicable way. Gandhi shows the way and one wishes that Gandhi’ way of resolving diverse things are understood at deep level. On the issue of beef eating he said, “...beef is not their (Muslims, added) ordinary food. Their ordinary food is the same as that of the millions. What is true is that there are very few Muslims who are vegetarians from religious motive. Therefore, they will take meat, including beef, when they can get it. But during the greater part of the years, millions of Muslims, owing to poverty, go without meat of any kind. These are facts. But the theoretical question demands a clear answer. As a Hindu, a confirmed vegetarian, and a worshiper of the cow whom I regard with the same veneration as I regard my mother (alas, no more on this earth!) I maintain that Muslims should have full freedom to slaughter cows, if they wish, subject of course to hygienic restrictions and in a manner not to wound the susceptibilities of their Hindu neighbors. Fullest recognition of freedom to the Muslims to slaughter cows is indispensable of communal harmony, and is the only way of saving cow.”⁽¹⁰⁾

By now the Muslim as the ‘Cow killer’ has been propagated so much by communal forces that yeoman efforts by those; wanting peace, tolerance and pluralism; are needed to overcome the hate built around this propaganda. The propaganda is highly inflammable and those indulging in divisive politics can easily bring in their agenda at community level, with dangerous consequences. The incident of beef lynching-atrocity in the name of cow; reflects the prevalent hatred which is there in the society and which can be and is being used for electoral purpose. Also the worsening of communal scenario after the new government has come to power is a warning bell for Indian Constitution's values of Fraternity in particular. One notes the immense rise in incidents of communal violence and intimidation of religious minorities as the communal organizations have become more bold and aggressive, feel that they have immunity in the new dispensation. We need to restore the feeling of security, trust and tolerance in our society.

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