

Why is the Cow a Political Animal?

If you want to understand some of the confusions of modern India, check out the many things the beef debate is today – and how it's only sometimes about the poor Indian cow.

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Ox cart in Delhi. Jorg Hackemann/Shutterstock.com

I met Alok Dubey during an interview meeting with Hindutva ideologue KN Govindacharya, who is in the throes of a cow protection campaign.

Alok's face was pale, eyes keen, his aspect serious. He moved and walked with extreme care, holding his lower back. We were introduced and I was told he was undergoing cancer treatment. Why had he come to a public place, I wondered, given how chemotherapy mauls the immune system, leaving the patients vulnerable to otherwise harmless germs. He was there looking for like-minded people, scoping the possibility of opening a *gaushala* (cowshed). Since then, I've got to know him a little.

He ran a successful business, exporting handicrafts, travelling across the world, taking an interest in the fine things in life. Then, two years ago, he learnt that the persistent pain in his lower backbone was due to a metastatic cancer. It changed his life dramatically. After a series of Indian doctors mishandled his case and gave up hope, he found an experimental treatment in the US that has kept him alive. Since then, he has scaled down his business and started thinking of death, about the world beyond his life, about what he will leave behind.

How did he settle on a *gaushala*? “Because cows are beneficial in so many ways. They embody a benevolent innocence,” he told me. After he fell ill, he was forced to reconsider food and nutrition. He believes in the hypothesis that the milk of Indian cows is safer because it has the ‘A2 milk protein’. (A1 and A2 are two of the most common alleles, or genetic mutations, of the [bovine beta casein gene](#).) The A1 allele, found in the milk of exotic Western cattle (like Holstein-Friesian cows), has been associated with certain health risks. Although the matter is far from settled, the [a2 Milk Company](#) in the US has capitalized on this in its [advertising](#).



Not to be left behind, you can hear cow protection activists make all kinds of claims to support the inherent virtues of desi cows. But you will never hear them dwell on the fact that Indian buffalo milk also has the A2 allele (as does Indian goat milk). In fact, some of them deny that buffalo milk has the same quality.

A holy strain on A2

While it is common for activists to use science selectively to bolster their arguments, it reaches a different level in the case of cow protection. It is [very easy](#) to find material that selectively uses modern scientific information to validate their reading of [old Sanskrit material](#), say, from Ayurveda. Given the number of people who have been working for several years on cure-all treatments from [cow urine](#), it is surprising that [allopathic medicine exists](#) at all in India. A [cow urine-based fizzy soft drink](#) was all set to eradicate Coke and Pepsi from India. I’m still waiting for Ranbir Kapoor and Shah Rukh Khan to appear in adverts for cow urine cola.

About 13 years ago, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in power at the center, I had reported about [a US patent](#) obtained on a combination of cow urine distillate and antibiotics, which made the medicines more effective. The research came from the [Central Institute for Medicinal and Aromatic Plants](#) in Lucknow and the [Go-Vigyan Anusandhan Kendra](#), a Nagpur outfit supported by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The numerous media reports on the patent failed to mention that “the urine distillate from buffalo, camel and deer provides similar activity of bioavailability.” In the years since that patent was obtained, [India has emerged a stronghold](#) of the growing threat of [antibiotic resistance](#). And yet [cow urine](#) and milk have not transformed us into a [fit, proud and nationalist country](#).

The utility of cow’s urine and dung in farming is also cited often. I asked agriculture scientist GV Ramanjaneyulu, who has led [a decade-long social campaign](#) to improve the lot of millions of farmers in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, easing their indebtedness. He and his colleagues have proved that biological approaches – using, among other things, cattle urine and dung – are [cheaper and more effective options](#) for insect pest management than toxic commercial pesticides sold on the market.

Ramanjaneyulu said that the effect of buffalo urine and dung is no different in his experience than that of cows and

bullocks. What determines the quality of dung and urine, he clarified, is what the animal gets to eat, not whether it comes from cows or buffaloes. While the merits of cow urine have been borne out in traditional practices for centuries, over-the-top claims of cow protection activists are based neither in experimental science nor in traditional approaches.



Babar's first act after conquering Delhi was to forbid the killing of cows. Aurangzeb withdrew this protection, but remained vegetarian.

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By Sopan Joshi / On Yahoo! Originals



Yet activists talk of only cow protection for maintenance of soil productivity, abandoning buffaloes to the slaughterhouse and for financing India's pink revolution. Beef from buffaloes became [India's top agri export item](#) in January this year after the demand for Indian basmati rice fell, particularly in Iran. (Buffalo meat is also categorized as beef in India and internationally.)

That this has happened under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's watch – he had accused the [previous Congress government](#) of supporting the pink revolution while [soliciting Yadav votes](#) during the last general election – only proves that [economic realities play a bigger role in politics](#) than ideology or religious sentiment. In fact, India is well on its way to becoming [the world's top beef exporter](#), overtaking Brazil.

Just leave out the cows, please...

Cow protection activists, however, project a very different economics. Govindacharya has been mobilizing Hindu religious figures and activist groups for a while now over the issue of cow protection. Over the past few months, he has held a series of meetings and consultations with Hindu religious figures and cow protection activists, to launch a countrywide campaign. A result of that is the *Gaumata Ka Niradesh Patra* (Cow-Mother's Manifesto), which he released publicly last month. It begins by quoting the Vedas to say the cow is the mother of all creation. That India's ancient health treatment system Ayurveda describes cow milk as nectar, and as treatment for several illnesses.

The manifesto then says modern science has verified this special quality, citing the presence of the A2 allele in the Indian cow's milk only, not in buffalo milk. The religious, economic and environmental importance of cows is obvious to one and all, it says. After summoning scientific and economic arguments in favor of cow protection, it goes on to clarify that this is a matter of the faith of Sanathan Dharma, hence not a matter subject to the arguments and illogic of the unbelievers. Before giving a list of 20-odd demands that includes treating cow slaughter as a crime comparable to manslaughter, the manifesto makes it clear that the protection and service of the cow is the country's supreme duty.

Seventy-one-year-old Govindacharya may have a strained, now-on-now-off relationship with the BJP, but his proximity to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has never been in question. (In fact, it was Govindacharya who spearheaded efforts to take the BJP out of its 'upper'-caste image, making inroads into the so-called 'backward' castes, paving the way for the emergence of an OBC leader like Modi, which even writers like [Christophe Jaffrelot](#) have acknowledged.) He is still plugged into his informal network within the Sangh Parivar. He referred me to the Jain Trust [Vinnyog Parivar](#) of Mumbai

and to David Simon Robinson's book 2013 *Meatonomics*.



Govindacharya's big concern is the smuggling of cows for meat, which he says is the handiwork of a large crime syndicate that features drugs and *hawala*. He said he has learned of drug addicts rounding up stray cows, for which their handlers give them Rs 150 per head. These animals are then trucked all the way across to West Bengal to be smuggled [across the border into Bangladeshi slaughterhouses](#) at rates of around Rs 8,000 each, he said.

"The volume of this trade is so large that the smugglers make money even after paying hefty bribes to police and transport officials across several states," he said. Recently, during a visit to West Bengal, [home minister Rajnath Singh](#) asked Border Security Force (BSF) soldiers to [crack down on cattle smugglers](#). Yet, in 2006, the then Director-General of the BSF had candidly said it was [impossible to check cattle smuggling](#), given the nature of the terrain along the 4,096km porous Indo-Bangla border. The DG had also asked for legalizing cattle export to Bangladesh.

What disturbs Govindacharya more than what the smugglers do is the change in the mindset of farmers in Indian villages. "It is a common practice to abandon unproductive cattle, which then damage standing crops as they have nothing else to eat. If somebody tries to take these animals away (to sell to smugglers), and some villagers opposes that person, other villagers tend to defend the smuggler. Such is the state of insensitivity and the change in the Hindu mindset."

This is a matter of "our civilizational moorings", he said, our choices in the face of market economics and technologies. The supreme organizer that he has been for the BJP and the RSS, Govindacharya's task is not without hazards and difficult questions, even within the secure confines of *gaushalas* managed by avid cow protection activists.

For one, there is the question of what to do with dead cows; are they to be skinned for leather or is that a violation of the cow's sacredness? He also mentioned a new technology, not available in the market yet, that questions the cow protector's ethics. It can ensure that a cow gives birth to only females; male calves are not much in demand for tilling and drawing bullock-carts now. (Laws against their slaughter make male calves a liability for cattle owners, feeding the smugglers.) Govindacharya labelled it a kind of male infanticide: "People who discuss such technologies forget that nature has its own balance of males and females." The big question is what to do with male calves which have little use in farming or transport.

A heavy price for sacredness

Buffaloes are slaughtered – young and grown males, as well as unproductive females – in regional abattoirs. This means they do not have to undergo the agony of being herded into cramped trucks and transported hundreds of kilometers to

Bangladesh. Which is what happens to unwanted cows and bullocks smuggled from several parts of India. They have to pay a heavy price for their sacredness at the hands of smugglers. An estimated 10 million heads of cattle [are smuggled into Bangladesh each year](#). The world's longest fence already at 2,700km (3,300km after it is completed), the Indo-Bangladeshi border cannot stop this illegal trade, valued at around US\$ 500 million (Rs 3,126 crore at current rates).

All this has to be done surreptitiously because transporting cows and bulls is regulated – if not banned – not just by laws to protect cruelty against animals but also laws to either ban their slaughter or regulate it. Livestock is a state subject, so states have [their own laws](#) on the matter. With [Maharashtra](#) and [Haryana](#) recently passing stringent laws against cow slaughter and consumption of cow meat – only cows, because beef from buffalo is legal – [20 out of India's 29 states](#) had some kind of restriction on cow slaughter. Haryana's law is particularly strong: a conviction can bring up to 10 years of rigorous punishment.

The state laws also ban the transport of cattle outside of the state. But, given the increasing rates of farm mechanization, farmers do not need cattle as much as they did in the past. They either sell or abandon animals; many of them are gathered and transported to either small-time illegal slaughterhouses, or to a state where this is legal. Such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and, particularly, West Bengal, from where they can be smuggled into Bangladesh. In a country where it is so easy to find people oppressed enough to do [manual scavenging](#) of human excreta and dive [naked into sewers](#), finding people for the illegal and lucrative trade of cattle is very easy.

They tend [to be Muslim](#); the community controls and dominates the slaughter business. Which is why the laws against cow slaughter are [considered anti-Muslim](#). The language of cow protection has an inherent sense of outrage about an animal sacred to Hindus. This has spawned a new genre [of cruelty videos on the Internet](#), featuring vigilante warriors of Hindutva. This genre splits in two categories. The ones showing cruelty to cattle, both in transport and in slaughter; these are meant to fill Hindu hearts with outrage that such deeds happen in their motherland. The second category is meant to inspire Hindu citizens and give them examples of what must be done to prevent this cruelty to the holy cow. They show vigilantes capturing trucks transporting cattle, followed by the torture and humiliation of truck drivers and attendants. No need to summon law enforcement agencies. From the religious iconography to the background music to the self-righteous orchestration of violence, the Hindu vigilantes bear more cultural resemblance to volunteers of ISIS, than any devoted Hindus you may know of.

The more intense samples from this genre are not put out in the open; they are sent via social networking sites and mobile apps like WhatsApp, but only to people who can be trusted with such graphic material. If you have friends within the Hindutva circuit, they can help you view such videos.

The media revolution has empowered both the smugglers – they manage their payoffs and logistics over mobile phones – and the vigilantes, who advertise and recruit via multimedia. This has given a new dimension to [the more classical methods](#) of fanning communal violence, by the killing of cows to incite Hindus and pigs to incite Muslims.

Love, hate and cow protection

Cow protection activism has changed, too. Not too long ago, it included people who were not so focused on milk and urine. [NS Ramasamy](#), for example. The founder-director of Bengaluru's Indian Institute of Management is regarded the doyen of management education in India. He was also a [noted animal rights campaigner](#). He stressed the need to accept the truth: that preventing slaughter of cattle was impossible. Since he was driven by compassion to all kinds of animals – and not by the desire to violently tame meat eaters – he spoke extensively about the need to modernize slaughterhouses to reduce the agony that animals have to undergo now.

His most controversial suggestion, which led to his marginalization among animal rights activists, was to create several rural abattoirs. That is a far better way to prevent mistreatment of animals, he told me in an interview 15 years ago, than carting them across hundreds of kilometres in terrible conditions. He was obsessed with bullock-carts, for he knew the historical utility of cattle in India had to do with draft power for farming and transport, as also for several other operations like milling. He created an organization called [CARTMAN](#); its focus was designing efficient bullock-carts that were easier

for draft animals.

As scrupulous about well-researched information as he was passionate about non-violence and ethical treatment of animals, he could rattle off statistics to illustrate how an indifferent urban elite, driven on imported petroleum, undermined the economic worth of draft animals. (During an interview in May 2000, he told me: “They save India six million tonnes of petroleum every year, which amounts to some Rs 12,000 crore. They provide 30,000 MW of power. They plough 100 million hectares of land, that is, 65 percent of the total cultivated area of India.”) [He died in 2012.](#)

Recently, I tried to meet Laxmi Narain Modi, who ran an organization called Bharatiya Cattle Resource Development Foundation on the outskirts of Delhi. I remembered him as a wealth of interesting information on the productivity and economic potential of animals, as also cultural and political attitudes towards livestock. While he disagreed with Ramasamy over creating rural abattoirs, he shared his passion for draft cattle. I wanted to ask him how he felt about this milk-obsessed cow protection that doesn't hesitate to commit violence. His assistant told me he had died in November 2014.

Beyond the Muslim butcher stereotype

Animal protection is now firmly a domain of people like Maneka Gandhi, who is [capable of any extreme](#) in her love for animals – she is also for [modernizing cow urine](#) applications. Cow protection activists often use overtly anti-Muslim references. Some insist the mistreatment of animals is a domain of meat-eating Muslims. There is little room here for nuanced positions, or for more complex realities.

Anupam Mishra, author and [environmentalist at Delhi's Gandhi Peace Foundation](#), has travelled across Indian villages, and was among the first people to write about the Chipko movement in the 1970s. He recalled to me a very different experience: “I was in Bikaner in the 1980s and heard that a family had a prize cow of the [storied Rathi breed](#). I went to them and asked if I could see it, perhaps take a photo. The family was courteous and hospitable, but refused to let me see the cow. They were afraid of the evil eye affecting their beloved cow. It was a Muslim family.”

As a reporter covering land, agriculture and livestock, I often ran into Muslim *maldharis* (literally ‘wealthmen’, or animal herding nomads) in Rajasthan and Gujarat, who spent more time with their animals than with humans. They did not use sentiment or ideology in their descriptions of their animals. Only a knowledge and concern that comes from handling animals. Recently, two cow protection activists from Rajasthan told me that some cow breeds, like the Rathi, were mostly maintained by Muslim rearers.

The breeds that made India prosperous

A veterinarian from Maharashtra, whom I had met [during a cattle fair](#) a long time ago, told me the story behind the [Deoni breed of cattle](#) from Latur district of Marathwada. The breed is a result of about 150 years of breeding and selection, which was also helped by a research grant from the Nizam of Hyderabad; it is said the Nizam's army needed specialized draft animals. (It may well have been like a Defence Research and Development Organization of their time.)

The regional breed Dangi (white, hardy, disease-resistant, low-maintenance, but small in size) was crossed with Gujarat's Gir cattle (known for size and strength, mostly colored red). The result was a white-colored line with a dark patch on the forehead, which had desirable qualities of both breeds. The highly productive breed soon spread among the farmers of the area, and is still quite popular. It has won many competitions in national [livestock shows](#). The credit for its final development is often given to Munshi Abdul Rehman, the then director of the Department of Animal Husbandry of Hyderabad state. The [facility near Udgir village](#) in Latur is still there.

Similarly, Amrit Mahal, a [storied cattle breed of Mysore](#), found a patron in Tipu Sultan, among other rulers. Not all of this is in the past, either. While scouting *gaushalas*, Alok Dubey met people who were looking to source cattle semen from Pakistan [for the prized Sahiwal cows](#). (Cattle breeds were usually named after their village of creation; Sahiwal is in Pakistan's share of Punjab.) The breed is doing quite well in [beef-eating Pakistan](#), and there is a lot of interest in its promotion and conservation. Dairyists in India, meanwhile, cannot find good Sahiwal breeding stock – I've met several

over the years who asked for sources for Sahiwal breeding stock.

The Indian government's plan to [cross-breed cattle for their 'improvement'](#) has harmed some of the most prized breeds, which were responsible in a big way for India's economic wealth in the distant past. This has happened regardless of the leaders – be it Rajeev Gandhi or Atal Bihari Vajpayee or Manmohan Singh or Narendra Modi. The cross-breeding plan aimed to improve the milk yield of unproductive cows by crossing them with more productive exotic varieties; instead, it ended up weakening the genetic purity of more productive Indian cattle.

Blame the White Revolution. The scramble to [develop India into a milk superpower](#) led to indiscriminate cross-breeding with Jersey and Holstein-Friesian stock. Because Indian cows are mostly considered poor milkers. In fact, *desi* cows automatically imply low milk yields, earning descriptions like 'non-descript'. An official of the Union government's animal husbandry department, who had surveyed cattle breeds across the country over years, once explained this attitude to me.

Draft vs. milk

Most [Indian cattle breeds](#), he told me, had not been bred and developed for high milk yields – they were either meant primarily to plough the soil and produce bullocks for pulling carts, or they were dual-purpose breeds offering a little milk on the side. Which gets reflected in the highly specialized nature of certain breeds.

Take the Khillari cattle of Sholapur in Maharashtra, famous for a sharp temper (and “horns that arch backwards and up like Shivaji's sword,” a farmer had told me). Khillari bullocks are so fast [they are raced](#), even with horses. Designed for speedy transport and for farming operations in tricky terrain, it does not make sense to evaluate Khillari on the basis of the amount of load its bulls can carry or the amount of the milk its cows produce. Does it make sense to evaluate a sports car on the basis of its mileage or load-carrying capacity?

“The draft and dual-purpose breeds were kept white in color, for white offers better heat tolerance. The milch breeds, it seems, were marked in red color by the breeders,” the official had told me; this insight was off the record, because the hypothesis is not easy to prove or disprove. Yet several people familiar with cattle breeding have told me they see merit in this theory. For the best milch breeds in India tend to be red in color, and there are at least four such breeds: Sahiwal of Punjab, Gir of Gujarat, [Red Sindhi](#) of [Sindh](#), and Rathi of Rajasthan and Sindh. One major exception to this is the Red Kandhari of Maharashtra, a red-colored draft breed. (In Europe, cattle was bred primarily for milk and meat, because the horse was preferred for draft work in farming and transport. Any wonder [horse meat became taboo](#) there?)

Evaluating Indian cattle merely on the basis of milk yield is unfair. While the milch breeds have been devalued by cross-breeding, the bullocks lost their value as petroleum gradually became the spine of transport. Tractors and trucks began to replace bullock-carts. The use of cattle dung in soil fertility got devalued, too.

With the Green Revolution introducing farmers to synthetic fertilizers that resulted from the [Haber-Bosch process](#) – it is often called [the single-most important technological invention](#) of the past century – the value of cattle dung has declined.

Let's talk dung

While farmers have known the value of dung for soil fertility since forever, it was the [English botanist Albert Howard](#) who formally showed how Indian soils had continued to be fertile despite centuries of tilling. Now regarded as a [progenitor of the organic farming movement](#), Howard showed in his 1940 book [An Agricultural Testament](#) that by using animal husbandry along with farming, farmers in India had conserved soil fertility, mimicking the nutrient cycle of the forest.

But bullock-carts and dung became symbols of backwardness and anachronism with the spread of subsidized petroleum and synthetic nitrogen fertilizers in independent India. (The 1957 Dilip Kumar-starrer [Naya Daur](#) is an epic dramatization of the conflict between draft carriages and automobiles in post-independence India.)

Now, cattle began to be viewed only as a source of milk, and since most Indian cattle breeds had not been bred specifically for milk, they became useless (hence the cross-breeding project). The government acknowledged the problems with its cross-breeding program in the 1990s. There was a sudden clamor to conserve Indian cattle breeds, especially after the

[Rosalin Institute of Scotland](#) allegedly tried in 1997 to obtain a patent on the genes of the [Vechur breed](#) of Kerala, the world's smallest cow.

It is far easier to scream about the value of Indian things when foreigners show interest in them! Outrage and mob mentality come far more readily than the effort it requires to understand a very complex and diverse country, with equally complex natural resources and their histories. Despite the rhetoric and [government efforts](#) to conserve these varieties, as also [specific schemes](#), the [desiccation of *desi* cattle breeds](#) continues.

Shiva's Nandi

The most striking example I found of an invaluable breed falling by the wayside is of [Ongole](#), the pride of Prakasam district in Andhra Pradesh. Perhaps the world's tallest and hardiest bull, this ancient breed has for long remained the ideal of low-maintenance strength. One of the most impressive sights I can remember is seeing four majestic, prize Ongole bulls at a cattle fair. Their humps were above my head. A farmer and breeder from AP told me that God Shiva's bull [Nandi](#) is modelled after Ongole specs, as can be seen in temples across the country. How did he know, I asked. Because sculptures in very old temples depicted the breed.

Yet good Ongole cattle are not easy to find now, even in AP. Where do you find them? Across the world, really. In Malaysia, as livestock expert [Sagari Ramdas found out](#): "It is shocking that in India we continue to have animal breeding and development policies that target the replacement and upgradation of our indigenous breeds with exotic Holstein-Friesians and Jerseys, which ironically are imported from Australia and the US. This, thereby, dilutes our breeds to such an extent that today the mighty Ongole is on the list of threatened breeds of the country." [Australia is now the exporter](#) to Indonesia of Ongole cattle – called the Brahman breed on the international livestock market.

The finest Ongole cattle is now found in Brazil, the [world's largest exporter of beef](#) (by volume). Today, 80-90 percent of Brazilian cattle meat production is said to come from the breed called [Nelore](#), derived from Ongole. In the livestock shows and cattle fairs where the best animals are brought, I've seen Brazilian traders scouting for Ongole bulls. For a prize bull, they were ready to offer any price; the best specimens of [Gujarat's Gir breed are also now in Brazil](#), even as 'Make in India' and 'Gujarat Model' do the rounds in TV studios.

I've seen 'Brahman' bulls in [exhibitions and cattle museums](#) of Texas in the US, [where they are glorified](#), even if they are eaten. But I have not met one devout Shaivite in India – let alone the average Hindu – who has heard of the link between Shiva's Nandi and the magnificent Ongole.

The carriers of India

The cultural importance of cattle in India is due to how critical bullocks were to the economy, not just to the nutritional and religious value of milk. The special position of cattle in India had a lot to do with their economic benefits; as those benefits have got devalued, so has cattle. Journalist [Harish Damodaran](#) has followed this story for many years, showing how [cow protection is leading to buffaloization](#). His writing [lays down the economics](#) quite sharply: "The farmer is ultimately under no obligation to bear the responsibility of protecting the *gau mata* without any compelling economic rationale." Hindu sentiment and a ban on cow slaughter is clearly not as powerful an incentive for conserving prized cattle breeds as old-fashioned economics.

"Who bred and conserved *desi* cows? Farmers or cow protection activists? And did they breed them for religious reasons or for their survival needs?" asked Ramanjaneyulu, who has spent half his life working with farmers and rural communities. "Love for animals comes naturally when they are a part of your life cycle. But several *gaushalas* run by Hindu activists keep cows in terrible conditions. There is no space for them to move around, they step on each other and get hurt. There is little fodder. This is what happens when animals are taken out of a real life situation and made into mere emblems of religious politics. The 'holy cow approach' is all about urban people dictating terms to rural people."

It wasn't always so. Before the onset of farm mechanization and petroleum-driven transport and synthetic fertilizers, it was common for rulers of all hue to protect cows and bullocks, for the entire economy depended on cattle. All kinds of emperors

in India have discouraged cow slaughter, if not for economic reasons, than political ones.

One notable example is of Babar, the Persianate Turko-Tartar-Uzbek who founded the Mughal dynasty in India. Babar's [first act after conquering Delhi](#) from Ibrahim Lodhi, it seems, "was to forbid the killing of cows because that was offensive to Hindus." So I checked with a historian friend, who told me it is commonly known that Babar stopped cow slaughter. Which explains why history itself is such a political subject and why each ideology tries to present history to suit its own interests.

Welcome to the Mughals

"For the stability of the Empire this is written. O my son!" wrote Babar in the *Wasiyyat namd-i-majchfi*, his secret testament to his son Humayun. "The realm of Hindustan is full of diverse creeds. Praise be to God, the Righteous, the Glorious, the Highest, that He hath granted unto thee the Empire of it. It is but proper that thou, with heart cleansed of all religious bigotry, should dispense justice according to the tenets of each community.'

"And in particular refrain from the sacrifice of cow, for that way lies the conquest of the hearts of the people of Hindustan; and the subjects of the realm will, through royal favour, be devoted to thee. And the temples and abodes of worship of every community under Imperial sway, you should not damage. Dispense justice so that the sovereign may be happy with the subjects and likewise the subjects with their sovereign. The progress of Islam is better by the sword of kindness, not by the sword of oppression." (Abstracted from the 1936 book *The Mughal Empire From Babar To Aurangzeb*, by SM Jaffar of Peshawar. It mentions that "the original document is in Persian and is treasured in the Hamida Library at Bhopal as one of its heirlooms.")

"His son Humayun was more 'Indianised', even giving up animal flesh for some months when he started the campaign to recover his throne, and deciding, after much reflection, that beef was not a food fit for the devout," wrote scientist and food historian KT Achaya in his monumental 1994 book *Indian Food: A Historical Companion*. "Akbar did not like meat and took it only seasonally 'to conform to the spirit of the age', and because he had 'the burden of the world on his shoulders', according to Abul Fazal."

Quite unlike his predecessors, Aurangzeb withdrew this status of the cow. But he is described in terms that could very easily be an account of the ideal RSS *pracharak*: "Aurangzeb was a spartan. Tavernier says that no animal food passed his lips; he became thin and lean, to which the great fasts he keeps have contributed, he only drank a little water, and ate a small quantity of millet bread...besides this, he slept on the ground, with only a tiger's skin over him." (Unrelated fact: Aurangzeb – like Mohammed-bin-Tughlaq, Akbar and Jahangir – drank only water from the river Ganga most of the time.)

After Aurangzeb, the lesser Mughals went back to Babar's instructions. During the revolt of 1857, the last Mughal king, Bahadur Shah Zafar, banned cow slaughter to gain Hindu support. This is the stage when things begin to change rapidly, when cow protection politics acquired the bitterness we see today. For the revolt was a result of – and led to – several upheavals that have a direct bearing upon current politics.

Fine tuning modernity and nationalism

Along with other changes that the British colonial rule had brought – like census surveys and railways – it changed power relations and identity. Among Muslims of northern India arose at least two clear reactions: the modernists who believed in English education, like [Syed Ahmed Khan](#) (who had remained loyal to the British during the revolt and who founded the Anglo-Muhammedan Oriental College, now known as Aligarh Muslim University), and conservatives who were anti-British, some of whom founded [the seminary at Deoband](#) in Uttar Pradesh.

There were several (and varied) reform movements among Hindu societies across India. Some used cow protection to mobilize Hindu support and launch [a cow protection movement](#). This culminated in Hindu-Muslim riots across northern India between 1880 and 1894. The cow had become political in a different manner now.

"The Arya Samaj is one of the most important of the modern sects, and was founded by Pandit Dayanand Saraswati, a Brahmin of Kathiawad, who having convinced himself of the untrustworthiness of the sacred books of the Hindus

subsequent to the Vedas, formulated his new system and attacked the existing orthodox Hinduism,” wrote the British police officer DF Mckracken on August 9, 1893. He was the officiating general superintendent of the “Thagi and Dacoity Department”, the first name of the political intelligence set-up (1840-1910) of the British in India.

The official noted that the “movement is to a great extent confined to the educated classes... The Aryas have an influence quite out of proportion to their numerical strength from the fact that they are recruited almost entirely from the English-educated classes and that their tenets are most popular among Pleaders, Government servants and others who have the greatest pretensions to mental enlightenment...”

Hinduism, now a revealed religion

His most telling observation, though, is in how the Arya Samaj wanted to cast Hinduisim, a diverse and highly complex (often contradictory) set of beliefs, as a revealed religion with a centralized and authoritative canon, like Judaism, Christianity or Islam. McCracken wrote: “In the eyes of the Arya Samaj the four Vedas constitute the only infallible revelation of God in the Vedas and the revelation of God in Nature, and the first practical element in this belief is the interpretation of the Vedas in conformity with the proved results of Natural Science. In their interpretation of the Vedas the Arya Samaj find themselves at issue with other Sanskritists.”

McCracken’s account can be read in the Gandhian historian Dharampal’s (1922-2006) last book, published in 2002 under the title *The British Origin of Cow-Slaughter in India*. Dharampal’s book draws from official documents to show that the riots of 1880-1894 were not [the obvious Hindu-Muslim conflagration](#) they were made out to be. The book cites accounts of how “many prominent Muslims as well as the Parsis and Sikhs actively participated in the (cow protection) movement.” Dharampal wrote that large-scale cow slaughter was not the handiwork of Muslims who came to India from central and western Asia: “The question of the sacrifice of a cow did not arise as the land where Islam arose did not have many cows.”

They were habituated to the meat of goats and mutton, sacrificing camels on the occasion of festivals like Eid or for large feasts, the book says. “Later on, as there was naturally animosity between the Indian people and the Islamic conquerors, the latter at times, to humiliate and insult local sentiments, began to kill the cow... But it seems that political necessity...induced many Islamic kings at various times to forbid cow killing in the areas they ruled.”

Dharampal rues the lack of research on cow killing between 1200 and 1700, when a series of Muslim kings ruled over a large part of India. But he goes on to show that systematic slaughter of cattle began in India with the East India Company establishing itself. The British, unlike the central and west Asians, were habituated to beef. They set up large slaughterhouses that could process thousands of cattle in a day for their army.

Dharampal’s book quotes from a letter dated December 8, 1893, from the office of Queen Victoria to the viceroy of India, HPF Lansdowne: “Though the Muhammedan’s cow killing is made the pretext for the agitation, it is in fact, directed against us, who kill far more cows for our army, than the Muhammedans.”

Local grievances plus the cow

Other scholars have studied the origin of the cow-protection movement and the 1880-1910 Hindu-Muslim riots over cow killing in a different framework. Gyanendra Pandey, a historian of the Subaltern Studies school, turned his attention to the subject in his 1981 paper titled “[Rallying Round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpur Region, c. 1888-1917](#)”. He found the riots in Bhojpur had to do with the Ahir caste making a bid for a higher social status. Pandey’s analysis shows the riots were fuelled by competing caste relations and the changing dynamics of land ownership.

Historian [Peter Robb](#) of the School of Oriental and African Studies wrote a widely-cited paper on the subject in 1986: “[The Challenge of Gau Mata: British Policy and Religious Change in India, 1880-1916](#)”. He observed that “cow-protection was grafted on to allmanner of local grievances.”

“[I]n India, religion was never the self-contained compartment that Victorian Englishmen expected it to be...the confusion between religious and secular life is merely one example of the conflict between British concepts and the Indian realities they purported to explain. The British felt a certain contempt for Indian and especially Hindu religious life – a feeling

which was shared by some ‘progressives’ among the Indian intelligentsia,” Robb wrote.

This contempt for Hindu religious life is quite common among India’s English-speaking elite even today. I have friends who have utter contempt for many things Hindu, especially the holiness of the cow. Their exposure to the religious diversity within Hinduism tends to be limited, as they consider religious feelings a baggage from the past that must be discarded along the path to a better, more enlightened future. The ban on cow slaughter and the politics over cows enrages them. They often refer me to historian DN Jha’s book *The Myth of the Holy Cow*.

Did ancient Hindus eat beef?

“For more than a century the sanctity of the Hindu cow has been not only a matter of academic debate – communalist Hindus and their fundamentalist organizations have even tried to hijack it into the political arena,” begins the preface of Jha’s book. “[T]hey have clung to the idea that this animal has always been sacrosanct and inviolable and that their ancestors, especially the Vedic Indians, did not eat its flesh. They have also associated beef-eating in India with the coming of Islam and have treated that as an identifying mark of the Muslim community. The present work, however, argues that the ‘holiness’ of the cow is a myth....”

The book is an exhaustive collection of scholarly references and attitudes to the eating of beef in ancient India. Some historian friends described to me the violent opposition Jha had to bear from Hindutva groups opposed to his book. Govindacharya, for example, called him a “buddhi rakshas” (roughly translates to ‘intellectual devil’), saying the historian lacked training in the grammar of ancient Sanskrit and had misread and misinterpreted old references. So I got Jha’s phone number and called him, hoping to hear his story. He said he keeps in poor health and refused to meet, saying he had already said what he wanted to say in his book.

No cow protection activist, though, could refer me to a scholarly refutation of Jha’s book. This debate falls in the familiar Hindutva-vs-Secularist polarity. Neither side tries to reach out to the other, through scholarship or through social efforts. Each side is absolutely convinced of its position; the world of Hindu philosophy is so complex even [its introductory Wiki page](#) boggles the mind. There is a great dearth of non-partisan scholarship on sensitive subjects in India, and non-partisan scholars are seldom part of public debates.

So I consulted three scholars I have come to trust over the years, for they are free of both the Hindutva ideology and not associated with the Marxist school in academia. Mithilesh Chaturvedi teaches at University of Delhi’s department of Sanskrit. Ravindra Pathak is a Sanskrit and Pali scholar, teacher and social activist in Gaya, Bihar. And IPS officer Acharya Kishore Kunal took early retirement to dedicate all his time to Sanskrit scholarship; now the chairman of the Bihar State Board of Religious Trusts, his best-known work is the two-volume *Dalit Devo Bhava*, an exploration of Dalit themes in Sanskrit literature.

All three of them, separately, explained the matter in a similar manner. They said it is possible to read and find references for whatever one wants to prove in the vast array of Sanskrit literature. Your answers, very often, are determined by what you ask in the first place. For example, Pathak said, it is entirely possible to interpret the Vedas in an atheistic light, explaining the *Devtas* as merely representations of natural forces like water, air and fire. Having assisted Indologists in their research, Pathak finds that several scholars come ready with their conclusions, and their research is focused on finding material to bolster their hypothesis.

An ever-evolving set of beliefs

All three insisted, however, that Hindu practices today are not determined by what is written in the ancient Sanskrit texts, even if they retain some of their varied influence. They mention the inherently dynamic nature of Hindu philosophy, in which context is all-important. There is ample disagreement between ancient schools of Dharmic philosophy, and Hindu practices today show great influence of Jain, Buddhist and Vaishnav thought, among other things.

When a Hindu is required to swear upon a book in a court of law, Kunal reminded me, it is not any of the four Vedas or the *Manusmriti* (which itself is one of 20-odd *smriti* scriptures). It is on the *Bhagvad Gita*, a much later text compared to the

Vedas.

They all agree that meat – even beef – was eaten in ancient India, though it is impossible to say how many people ate it. They acknowledge that ritual sacrifice did exist in ancient India; Chaturvedi points to sacrificial rituals described in the literature of the Mimamsa school. But they also say that the cow's sacredness to Hindus changed gradually in a way that its meat became taboo. And this happened before the medieval times. They insist that the cow's sacredness in Hindu belief is not a myth.

Chaturvedi said the most appealing explanation he found for this transition was in the thoughts of Vinoba Bhave, MK Gandhi's spiritual successor. A Sanskrit scholar who trusted his own reading over any rhetoric, Bhave was a complex figure, an ascetic with a fine aesthetic sense; one of modern India's least understood leaders. In 1979, Bhave sat on a fast, [demanding a ban on cow slaughter](#) in Kerala and West Bengal, perpetrating a political crisis for the Morarji Desai government. (In fact, the satyagraha Bhave began became India's longest-running fast, [ending only recently](#) after the Maharashtra government banned cow slaughter in the state.) Yet, in his speeches, he made it clear that if tractors kept rolling in, people should prepare to slaughter bullocks and eat them.

Bhave's most striking observation, Chaturvedi stressed, was his frank acknowledgement that ancient Sanskrit texts mention the eating of beef. So I pulled out my copy of Bhave's [Gita-Pravachan](#) and found the section where he says we should not be surprised when we find out that some ancient rishis ate beef and meat was commonly eaten in India. He maintained it is a sign of evolution that such a large population accepted non-violence and turned vegetarian. Bhave said we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors so we can see much further than they saw, not be limited by their limitations.

I have looked for years, and not met any cow protection activists with the courage to accept the uncomfortable truth with such courage. They tend to emphasize only their reading of the Vedas, determined to bring back the Golden Vedic Age through cow protection. Which alienates me.

My upbringing in a Hindu family has exposed me to the *Gita* and the *Ramcharitmanas* and the *Bhagwat Puran*, but never to the Vedas. When they need recourse to faith, most Hindus draw upon the devotional poetry of Tulsidas, Gyaneshwar, Meerabai, Raheem and scores of others; they do not chant verses from the Rigveda. In fact, 'Vediya Dhor' is an old term in folk culture to mock the carrier of Vedic knowledge as a beast of burden. The Vedic figure of Indra attracts little devotion, even as his nemesis Krishna is perhaps the most popular Hindu god.

(A summary for those not familiar with the story from the *Bhagwat Puran*: the boy Krishna stops his father from making sacrificial offerings to Indra. The god of rain gets angry and sends down a seven-day-seven-night deluge, causing a flood. Krishna lifts the [Govardhan hill](#) as refuge from the flood. Indra is humiliated. The story is as much about appreciating nature and ecology over and above a tyrannical god, as it is a lesson in *karma-yog*, which is explained in greater detail in the *Gita*.)

I noticed even at a young age that the term 'Hindu' doesn't occur in any religious text. Several scholars have shown how the existing Hindu identity – or at least a significant part of it – draws from the colonial encounter. So, while some groups in India have eaten meat and beef since forever, the values of vegetarianism, non-violence and cow veneration have also been common – and not just in one or two caste groups, either. Despite the practice of [sacrificing animals](#) coming down sharply in the past century or so, several Hindus in India and Nepal still practice the rites of *Bali*, most prominently during the [festival of Gadhimai](#) and at the [Kamakhya temple](#) in Assam.

This co-existence of meat-eating and vegetarianism is unique to India. How did this happen? In his *Indian Food: A Historical Companion*, after several pages describing meats eaten in India, Achaya explored the roots of vegetarianism and the beef taboo. He referred to the "sheer abundance and wide range of foodstuffs available even from Harappan times...that could fashion vegetarian meals of high nutritional quality, and gustatory and aesthetic appeal. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that nowhere else in the world except in India would it have even been possible to be a vegetarian in 1000 BC."

Then I stumbled into a remarkable book: *The History of Vegetarianism and Cow-Veneration in India*. First published in

German in 1962, its English translation appeared in 2010. The author, German Indologist [Ludwig Alsdorf](#), had spent several years studying Jainism, and is regarded the first man to apply the historical method to the vegetarianism question. While it extensively deals with material that Jha also uses, Alsdorf's writing is free of polemics.

Which is why his work attracted a remarkable translator for the 2010 English edition: [Bal Patil](#), a journalist and scholar in Mumbai who was the force behind the [Jain community obtaining minority status](#). But Patil was not in favor of any identity politics. Concerned about religious intolerance, he was an outspoken [critic of the RSS](#). I called Patil's associates – he died in 2011 – to find out why he translated a book that takes a dry, objective look at Jain scriptures and faith. I was told Patil was concerned about the truth, even if it was inconvenient; that he favored an open debate on references in Jain scriptures of [Mahavir eating meat](#).

Vegetarianism and cow-veneration are not directly related in history, neither was vegetarianism the basis of *ahimsa* (non-violence) to begin with, Alsdorf wrote. The idea of non-violence predates Jainism and Buddhism, even if it was the two movements that really made it popular in the face of Vedic sacrificial rituals. For example, it is believed that the ritual offering of coconut smeared with vermilion is a substitute for the severed head of an animal or even a human sacrificed at the altar; even Acharya refers to it. (Which points to what Vinoba Bhave said about accepting our gory past.)

The Buddha was against ritual sacrifice of animals, but not against consumption of meat. His instruction to his monks was that no animal should be killed to feed them; but they were allowed to eat any food they received in alms, including meat. It is widely understood that the Buddha had consumed pork before he died. Yet the origin of vegetarianism and cow-veneration may never get elucidated by available sources, Alsdorf concluded: “For the Indologist, it is indeed not a new experience that the pursuit of pressing problems in the present leads him back to the dim and distant past.”

Anyone for a beef-eating Hindu nationalist?

The limitations of knowledge and sources, along with diverse interpretations and motives, open the doors to many ways to see the cow slaughter controversy. There is an argument that [India was never conquered when Hindus ate beef](#). This subversion of Hindutva rhetoric with Hindutva arguments is not all that new. The father of the ideology of Hindutva, Vinayak Damodar ‘Veer’ Savarkar, had a complex position on cow protection and cow worship. He saw cow protection as a symbol of compassion and humanism, but [no holiness was above logic and nationalism for him](#).

“Animals such as the cow and buffalo and trees such as banyan and *peepal* are useful to man, hence we are fond of them; to that extent we might even consider them worthy of worship; their protection, sustenance and well-being is our duty, in that sense alone it is also our *dharma!* Does it not follow then that when under certain circumstances, that animal or tree becomes a source of trouble to mankind, it ceases to be worthy of sustenance or protection and as such its destruction is in humanitarian or national interests and becomes a human or national *dharma?*”

“When humanitarian interests are not served and in fact harmed by the cow and when humanism is shamed, self-defeating extreme cow protection should be rejected,” he wrote. “A substance is edible to the extent that it is beneficial to man. Attributing religious qualities to it gives it a godly status. Such a superstitious mindset destroys the nation's intellect.”

Every now and then, an admirer of Savarkar raises the topic. “Can anyone imagine that the ‘Father of Hindutva’ advocated beef-eating (in special circumstances), rejected the divinity of the Vedas, denounced the sanctity of the caste system and launched a virulent attack on the hypocrisy of the priests?” wrote [Ved Pratap Vaidik](#), a journalist close to several Hindutva figures. “Incidentally, Savarkar was a beef-eater,” wrote [Varsha Bhonsle](#) on Savarkar's birth anniversary, February 26, in 1998. “For he was, above all else, a rationalist – a true Hindu – and eons ahead of contemporary Hindutvawadis.”

“The cow is but a milch symbol of the Hindu nation. By no means should it be considered its emblem...The cow exploited and eaten at will, is an appropriate symbol of our present-day weakness. But at least the Hindu nation of tomorrow should not have such a pitiable symbol,” wrote Savarkar in 1936. “The symbol of Hindutva is not the cow but the man-lion (Narsimha, the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who was half-man, half-lion).” Savarkar did not stop here either.

“The qualities of god permeate into his worshipper. Whilst considering the cow to be divine and worshipping her, the entire

Hindu nation became docile like the cow. It started eating grass. If we are to now found our nation on the basis of an animal, let that animal be the lion. Using its sharp claws in one leap, the lion fatally knocks and wounds the heads of wild mammoths. We need to worship such a Narsimha. That and not the cow's hooves, is the mark of Hindutva."

It is ironic, though, that the Asiatic lion needs protection to survive today, even as [cows and their rearers thrive](#). Wildlife and forest conservationists in India have complained for years that overgrazing by booming populations of cattle is among the reasons great cats like lions and [tigers face extinction](#). The world of Hindutva iconography can be a minefield; one cannot tell which step may cause an explosion.

The Dalit predicament

One explosion happened three years ago on the campus of Osmania University in Hyderabad. Some student bodies, including an association of Dalit and Adivasi students, decided to hold a Beef Festival to protest BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh [making a stringent law](#) against cow slaughter. There was a backlash, with members of the RSS student body, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), [staging a violent protest](#) against the public consumption of beef. A follow-up of the Beef Festival in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University also [ran into trouble](#).

The festival was an instance of [Dalit assertion](#) of their dietary habits. The cow's holiness has long been a source of hurt and humiliation for Dalit communities. "[T]here is no untouchable community which has not something to do with the dead cow. Some eat her flesh, some remove the skin, some manufacture articles out of her skin and bones," wrote BR Ambedkar, the architect of India's Constitution, in his 1948 book *The Untouchables: Who Were They And Why They Became Untouchables*.

Dalit activists and scholars find the ban on [cattle meat unethical](#) and another example of caste hypocrisy. "Such laws are immoral," said 'Kuffir' Naren Bedide, a thinker and social activist in Hyderabad, one of the editors behind [Round Table India](#). He said this is about powerful castes [imposing their sensibility](#) on people who have consistently consumed beef, a source of cheap nutrition for poor people. "Caste-Hindus say this is a matter of their religious sensitivity. What about Dalit traditions and sensitivities? Are they worth nothing?" he asked.

Why is an animal so sacred when human beings are considered so impure?

Because of the [Muslim invaders](#), says BJP's Dalit spokesperson Bizay Sonkar Shastri. The Dalit sub-castes, his [three new books](#) claim, were Brahmin and Kshatriya before Muslim invaders forced them down the caste ladder. The books were released by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, who comes from a Maharashtrian Brahmin caste that has historically dominated the RSS's top echelons. What is stopping the RSS and the BJP from restoring the former glory of the Dalits? Especially because the ideology of Hindutva aspires to eradication of caste divisions.

I've found this difference between practice and theory on caste quite common. I recently learned of an incident from Sanjay, a young writer and activist in Delhi, who had worked with an RSS activist for a few months, helping in the publishing of a periodical. One day, the RSS member came over to his house; when he was offered food, he refused to eat there, for Sanjay's family is from the Valmiki caste associated with manual scavenging.

That day, Sanjay quit the journal. He has described to me the daily humiliation he faces due to his caste, regardless of capability and education. It isn't Muslim invaders who mistreat Sanjay but ordinary Hindus. Teachers and employers and nationalists. Even if a *gaushala* were to offer the unemployed Sanjay a lucrative job now, he will not risk the humiliation.

Who needs cow protection laws?

Not the farmers who are getting rid of cows and bullocks in favor of buffaloes and tractors. So will livestock breeders benefit from it? "Such laws will harm the poorest," said Nitya Sambamurti Ghotge, a veterinary surgeon who heads [Anthra](#), a group in Pune that has worked with rural livestock rearers since 1992.

Giving the example of the Rajasthan government amending its cow protection laws to register cattle breeders, and track their [animals through microchips](#), Ghotge called cow protection laws "environmentally daft", because this will put a great

burden on shrinking pastures and fodder resources. “The rich will anyway get what they want, but how will the poor farmers and animal rearers get so much fodder?” she asked. Historically, farmers and animal rearers have been able to get rid of animals in difficult times for their survival, she said; now, that will become difficult.

Laws against cow slaughter will only criminalize the livestock trade, not protect the animals, said Ghotge. Only the smugglers and the law enforcement officials will benefit from the ban on cow slaughter, not the poor farmers or the livestock. Like the agriculture scientist Ramanjaneyulu, Ghotge holds that the cow protection laws unjust; it is about powerful urban people outsourcing the burden of cow protection on the rural poor, she said.

Is this happening already? Yes, said Girdhari Singh, a social activist from Nagaur town who works on water conservation in western Rajasthan. Girdhari travels a lot in that region and knows people across the social fabric, so he has always been a good source of information. He said the raids from Hindutva vigilantes have made it very difficult for farmers to come to Nagaur and buy bullocks from cattle rearers.

The [Nagauri breed](#) is famed for its fleet and sturdy bullocks, especially for use in clayey soils of Madhya Pradesh and Punjab. “Farming in clayey soil requires great traction from very strong bullocks,” Girdhari explained. Farmers from MP, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab used to flock the [cattle fairs of Nagaur](#), looking for good bullocks. “A strong bullock of two-three years age fetched Rs 10,000 to Rs 25,000 in the past. Farmers used to buy them in a group and share the cost of transport,” Girdhari told me.

Not any more, because the farmers struggle to transport the bullocks. Vigilantes, especially of the Bajrang Dal, patrol the highways and stop any trucks carrying cattle, because they assume it is smuggling. Girdhari gave examples of such ‘raids’ by cow protection activists, especially one near Pushkar. “Farmers have shown them the papers and sale deeds, explaining it doesn’t make sense to spend such a lot of money to slaughter a bullock. But the vigilantes just do not listen. The farmers were harassed no end,” Girdhari rued.

The cattle rearers are in greater distress. Because Nagauri cows gives very little milk, the male calves are the only source of income for rearers. They have no option but to abandon the cows, for they cannot feed the holy cow without the income from the bullocks, Girdhari said. The footfall in the cattle fairs has reduced drastically since the vigilantes became active; it is not that the farmers from neighboring states do not demand Nagauri bullocks. It is just that they cannot have the animals because of cow protection activists. Farmers in other parts of the country are also feeling the pinch, be it the [distressed farmer of Vidarbha](#) or mango orchard owners who can’t find any cows to be seen to graze away [unwanted vegetation and provide dung for fertilizer](#). In their religious zeal, cow protection activists have not just turned animals of economic importance into a burden on their rearers, they have turned cow veneration from an element of non-violence to a violent emblem of [identity politics](#).

The violence is not a surprise. Much before the Lashkar-e-Taiba attacked [India’s Parliament in 2001](#), thousands of [cow protection activists attacked it in 1966](#). Senior police officials were hurt seriously, Congress president K. Kamaraj’s house was set on fire, and the home minister had to resign.

A utilitarian guide to cow protection

A few days ago, Alok Dubey and I travelled to Vrindavan and visited the Shripad Baba Gaushala. Baba Damodar Das runs the shelter now; he’s known to accept any animals rescued from slaughter. When police or vigilante groups seize smugglers’ trucks, they bring the cattle to the Baba; he never says no. He attends to about 3,000 heads of cattle. His skin baked by the sun and caked with mud, the *sanyasi*’s kindness to animals is matched by an acidic tongue.

He said cow protection has become a political game. It is much easier to make noise about cows than to take care of them. That most groups talk about serving the cow for religious reasons, when all they are actually interested in is the milk and dung and urine they get from them. Yet even he has a use for cows; the cow shelter, he explained, kept the legal disputes over the ashram at bay, since nobody can touch a *gaushala*. It is a lesson the urbane Alok has learned after one year of efforts to find a good model to set up a *gaushala*. He finds the cow-protection campaign uses religious sentiments for

political ends, and is not based in sound economics.

“The greatest shame for believing Hindus is not that cows are slaughtered and eaten by Muslims. It is that cows have to sift through garbage in Hindu localities for food. Cattle breeds will survive only when farmers and animal rearers profit from them. The best way to destroy our productive animal breeds is to get the government to conserve them,” said Alok.

He recalled that it was his grandmother who introduced him to a love for cows. “She also told me that the butcher is an agent of Yamraj [the Hindu god of death]. The butcher releases the animal from agony in a few moments, which is better than a painful life.”

Alok has given up his efforts to set up a *gaushala*. It does not make economic sense to him.

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