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COVER STORY

Sacred cow

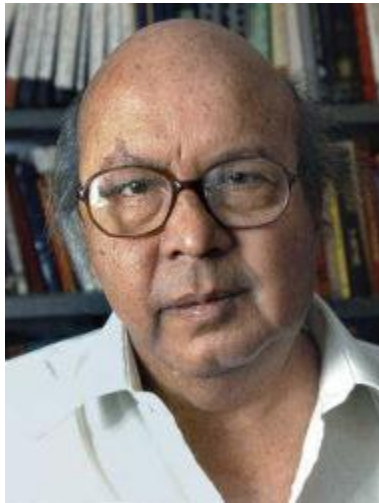
COVER STORY

'A political tool'

AJOY ASHIRWAD MAHAPRASHASTA

Interview with D.N. Jha, historian of ancient India and the author of 'The Myth of the Holy Cow'.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES



D.N. Jha: "Eating of beef was de rigeur in ancient India."

IN his career spanning more than 25 years, Dwijendra Narayan Jha, an eminent historian of ancient India, has dispelled many Hindutva myths. He has used ancient Indian literary and archaeological sources to show that much of the Hindutva propaganda is based on false premises. His book *The Myth of the Holy Cow* shows that beef has been a part of Indian dietary habits. He has worked extensively on the material culture of ancient India and has done research on feudalism in early medieval India, a topic his mentor, the historian R.S. Sharma, had so successfully handled. In the context of the Madhya Pradesh government's decision to implement an amended Act on cow slaughter, which is termed "draconian" by many analysts, Jha speaks in detail about the myth of the 'holy' cow in Indian traditions and how the Sangh Parivar has managed to use it to communalise the country. Excerpts from an interview:

Your book 'The Myth of the Holy Cow' dispels the impression that Muslims introduced beef-eating in the Indian subcontinent. What were the most important sources you used to come to this conclusion?

For over a century, the sanctity of the cow in India has been a matter of more than academic debate. Hindu communalists and their fundamentalist organisations have been propagating that the killing of the cow and eating its

flesh were introduced in India by the followers of Islam, and accordingly, they have stereotyped Muslims as beef-eaters. The best way to dispel this myth is to draw data from Indian religious texts to show the prevalence of beef-eating in ancient India. Accordingly, I have used evidence from Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain religious texts to show that our ancestors ate beef much before Islam came to India.

Could you give us some examples of where cows were used for consumption and for sacrifices in ancient India?

Animal sacrifice was very common in the Vedic period. In the agnadheya, which was a preparatory rite preceding all public sacrifices, a cow was required to be killed. In the asvamedha, the most important of public sacrifices, more than 600 animals and birds were killed and its finale was marked by the sacrifice of 21 cows. In the gosava, an important component of public sacrifices like the rajasuya and the vajapeya, a cow was offered to Maruts. The killing of animals, including cattle, figures in several other yajnas as well.

In the Vedic texts and the Dharmashastras, there are also references to occasions when cows were killed for consumption, and eating of beef was de rigeur. One later Vedic text unambiguously tells us that “verily the cow is food”, and another refers to the sage Yajnavalkya's stubborn insistence on eating the tender flesh of the cow. The reception of a guest, according to Vedic and post-Vedic normative texts, required the killing of a cow in his honour. Textual evidence also indicates that Brahmins were fed the flesh of the cow in funerary rites. I have indicated only a small portion of evidence, but ancient Indian texts provide copious references to the killing of the cow for sacrifice and sustenance.

You have used a lot of ancient Indian sources to elaborate on this point. But have there been other “Hindu sources” or literature in medieval India and modern India that elaborate on the material use of the cow?

There is considerable evidence of the continuity of the beef-eating tradition in post-Vedic times. Manusmriti (200 B.C.-A.D. 200), the most influential of the Dharmashastra texts, recalls the legendary examples of the most virtuous Brahmins who ate ox-meat and dog-meat to escape starvation. The Smriti of Yajnavalkya (A.D. 100-300) laid down that a learned Brahmin (shrotrya) should be welcomed with a big ox or goat. It may be recalled that most of the characters in the Mahabharata are meat-eaters, and not surprisingly, it refers to King Rantideva in whose kitchen 2,000 cows were butchered every day and their flesh, along with grains, was distributed among Brahmins.

The sage Bharadvaja is said to have welcomed Rama by slaughtering a fatted calf in his honour. What is found in religious or Dharmashastric texts is also reflected in secular literature. Early Indian medical treatises speak of the therapeutic use of beef, and several authors of literary works (Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Rajashekhara and Shriharsha, to name only a few) refer to the eating of beef.

How did the myth of the cow's holiness come into existence in the Hindu psyche? Are there incidents or periods in Indian history that establish the cow's holiness as opposed to its material use in ancient India? Were there parallel narratives in ancient India that saw the cow as a religious and holy symbol of Hinduism?

It is often held by some scholars that the Vedic cow was sacred. Such an assertion is based on the occurrence of the word aghnya (meaning, not to be slain) in the Atharvaveda. However, it has been convincingly proved that if the Vedic cow was at all inviolable, it was so only when it belonged to a Brahmin who received cows as a sacrificial fee (dakshina). Buddhism and Jainism opposed animal sacrifice and the killing of cattle. But even their canonical works do not refer to the cow as a sacred animal.

The sacred-cow concept developed much later. Lawgivers began to discourage beef-eating around the middle of the first millennium when Indian society began to be gradually feudalised, leading to a major socio-cultural transformation. This phase of transition, first described in the epic and Puranic passages as Kaliyuga, saw many changes and modifications in social norms and customs. Brahminical religious texts now began to speak of many earlier practices as forbidden in the Kaliyuga – practices which came to be known as Kalivarjyas, and most of the relevant texts mention cow-killing as forbidden in the Kaliyuga.

Cow-killing and eating of beef came to be increasingly associated with the proliferating untouchable castes. It is, however, interesting that some of the Dharmashastra texts consider these acts as no more than minor behavioural aberrations. Whatever be the Dharmashastric prescription, eating beef by some people cannot be ruled out. As recently as the late 19th century, Swami Vivekananda was alleged to have eaten beef during his stay in America. Similarly, in the early 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi spoke of the hypocrisy of orthodox Hindus who “do not so much as hesitate or inquire when during illness the doctor prescribes them beef tea”. Even today, 72 communities in Kerala – not all of them untouchable perhaps – prefer beef to the expensive mutton, and the Hindutva forces are persuading them to go easy on it.

A.M. FARUQUI



A SCENE IN Bhopal. Nothing is done about the care of cows like these which are often found rummaging through heaps of garbage for food.

In spite of all this, the development of the doctrine of non-violence in the Upanishadic thought, its prominent presence in the Buddhist and Jain world views, and its centrality in the Vaishnava religion, strengthened the idea of non-killing of animals: the cow became specially important and sacrosanct because of its economic value in an agrarian society and because Brahmins received them as dakshina and would not like them to be killed.

Since when did cow slaughter become a political issue in India? Has there been any historical movement around this issue? Could you give us some examples of when the “manufactured holiness” of the cow began to be used as a tool for political mobilisation?

The cow has tended to become a political instrument in the hands of rulers over time. The Mughal emperors (for example, Babar, Akbar, Jahangir and Aurangzeb) are said to have imposed a restricted ban on cow slaughter to accommodate the Jaina or Brahminical feeling of respect for and veneration of the cow. Similarly Shivaji, sometimes viewed as an incarnation of God who descended on earth for the deliverance of the cow and the Brahmin, is described as proclaiming: “We are Hindus and the rightful lords of the realm. It is not proper for us to witness cow slaughter and the oppression of Brahmanas.”

But the cow became a tool of mass political mobilisation when the organised Hindu cow-protection movement, beginning with the Sikh Kuka (or Namdhari) sect in the Punjab around 1870 and later strengthened by the foundation of the first Gorakshini Sabha in 1882 by Dayanananda Saraswati, made this animal a symbol to unite a wide-ranging people, challenged the Muslim practice of slaughter and provoked a series of communal riots in the 1880s and 1890s. Although attitudes to cow-killing had been hardening even earlier, there was an intensification of the cow-protection movement when in 1888 the North-Western Provinces High Court decreed that the cow was not a sacred object. Not surprisingly, cow slaughter very often became the pretext for many Hindu-Muslim riots – especially those in Azamgarh district in the year 1893 – in which more than 100 people were killed in different parts of the country. Similarly, in 1912-1913 violence rocked Ayodhya, and a few years later, in 1917, Shahabad witnessed a disastrous communal conflagration.

The killing of kine seems to have emerged again and again as a troublesome issue on the Indian political scene even in independent India. In 1966, nearly two decades after Independence, almost all Indian communal political parties and organisations joined hands in organising a massive demonstration by several hundred thousand people in favour of a national ban on cow slaughter, which culminated in a violent rioting in front of India's Parliament House, resulting in the death of at least eight persons and injury to many more. In April 1979, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, often supposed to be the spiritual heir to Mahatma Gandhi, went on a hunger strike to pressure the Central government to prohibit cow slaughter. Obscurantist and fundamentalist forces have converted the cow into a communal identity of Hindus and they refuse to appreciate that the "sacred" cow was not always all that sacred in the Vedic and subsequent Brahminical and non-Brahminical traditions and that its flesh, along with other varieties of meat, was quite often a part of the haute cuisine in early India.

Beef-eating is much more an accepted norm in south India than in north India. What could be the reasons for this, since such acceptance and oppositions must have grown historically?

In some parts of south India beef-eating is common, but it is not possible to generalise. Most tribes, Dalits and Muslims in different parts of the country, eat beef and so do the hill communities of north-eastern India. But even here, it is not possible to generalise because most tribes in the erstwhile south Bihar do not eat cow meat.

According to one estimate, 40 per cent of Hindus eat beef even today, even if we leave out the tribal people, Muslims and Christians. Dalits all over India have been eating beef. It is the most economical meat. The Madhya Pradesh government has recently banned not just cow slaughter but also the consumption of beef. Many believe the ban is draconian. What is your view on the Act?

In my view no sane Indian would like to kill his cattle, and if he does he can be punished under the law. Animal rights must be respected, but why a special status only to the cow? And if the Sangh Parivar is serious about stopping cow slaughter, what has it done in the BJP-ruled States for the care of cows which are often found bumbling between the luxurious limos of the privileged and the pushcarts of the poor, causing traffic snarls in metros, and browsing on heaps of garbage, ranging from inedible throw-outs to the stinking carrion.

It is preposterous to ban the slaughter of old, ailing and starving cows and to prohibit the consumption of their flesh, which is poor man's protein. The law to dictate dietary preferences is a gross violation of personal freedom and is certainly draconian. Why not remind the Sangh Parivar that its own ideologue of the Jan Sangh (now the BJP), K.R. Malkani, permitted without equivocation the eating of the flesh of cows dying a natural death.

What could be the implications of a resurgent anti-cow slaughter idiom in India? In most BJP-ruled States, this issue has seen a lot of political mobilisation, with one of the priorities of the respective governments being to bring an anti-cow slaughter Act as soon as they come to power.

The Sangh Parivar has communalised the politics of the country. The resurgent anti-cow slaughter movement will only add fuel to the fire.

AJOY ASHIRWAD MAHAPRASHASTA
in Bhopal

The Madhya Pradesh government beefs up its saffron agenda with a “draconian” law.

A.M. FARUQUI



Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan garlanding a cow at a function in Bhopal. He has allocated huge sums of money to establish state-run 'gaushalas'.

“IT is a contest between the two. The holy by-lanes of old Bhopal, which houses two of the largest mosques in Asia, the Taj-ul-Masjid and the Jama Masjid, were under attack from the holy cow,” said an activist of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), in a tone which he thought was in good humour, when asked about his reaction to the implementation of the Gau-Vansh Vadh Pratishedh (Sanshodhan) Vidheyak, or the Madhya Pradesh Prohibition of Slaughter of Cow-progeny (Amendment) Bill, by the State government. He had the haughty air of a victor as he said the President's assent for the Bill was the result of a long-drawn-out struggle by the Sangh Parivar to protect the cow, which was an integral part of Hindu culture.

The arenas for the contest, as he said, were old Bhopal and other townships in Madhya Pradesh where Muslims have been staying in ghettos since Independence. The ghettoisation of Muslims, according to many analysts, has increased dramatically after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was elected to power twice in the State in the past eight years.

Ever since the BJP came into power in Madhya Pradesh in 2003, ostensibly on an anti-corruption and development agenda, it has been soft-peddalling its aggressive Hindutva agenda and instead pushing, through its various cultural and student organisations, soft programmes that seek to Hinduise gradually the language of governance and administration in the State.

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan is said to have the unstinted support of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS). Other Sangh Parivar outfits such as the Bajrang Dal and the ABVP, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with saffron leanings complement his government's efforts. The recently approved Bill needs to be looked at in this context.

Genesis of the Bill

The amendment Bill was passed in the Assembly in 2010 to strengthen the existing Madhya Pradesh Gauvansh Pratishedh Adhiniyam (Madhya Pradesh Bovine Prohibition Act, 2004), which was passed during the tenure of another BJP Chief Minister, Uma Bharati. The Bill was

forwarded to the Union Home Ministry on September 3, 2010. It got presidential assent on December 22, 2011, and was published in the Madhya Pradesh Gazette (extraordinary) on December 31, 2011. The Act will soon come into force through an official notification even as anti-communalism and human rights activists term the law as "draconian".

Madhya Pradesh is the first State where the consumption of beef has been made illegal. Keshubhai Patel of the BJP, as the Chief Minister of Gujarat (1998 to 2001), had issued an official order making the consumption of beef illegal but withdrew the notification on the advice of the Vajpayee government at the Centre.

The amended Act in Madhya Pradesh puts the onus of proving the prosecution wrong on the accused in a case of cow slaughter. A person found guilty of cow slaughter is liable to imprisonment up to seven years, as against three years at present, and a minimum fine of Rs.5,000. The Act provides that no person shall slaughter or cause to slaughter or offer for slaughter any cow progeny by any means. Besides this, unprecedented powers have been given to a policeman in the rank of head constable to arrest a person consuming beef or slaughtering a cow. The arrest could also be made on mere suspicion.

A police constable or anyone authorised by a competent authority shall have the power of entry, inspection, search and seizure and to present the case in court. According to the law, "no person, including a transporter, shall transport or offer to transport or cause to be transported any cow progeny, either by himself or through an agent, servant or any other person acting on his behalf, within the State or outside it, with the knowledge that the calf would be or was likely to be slaughtered".

Other BJP-ruled States such as Gujarat have banned cow slaughter and the sale, purchase and transportation of beef, but its consumption is not illegal. The Karnataka Prevention of Slaughter and Preservation of Cattle Bill, 2010, has still not got the governor's clearance. That Bill, too, includes the search-and-seizure clause, but the powers for it lie with a policeman above the rank of sub-inspector. Maharashtra, too, bans the slaughter of cows, but bullocks, buffaloes and calves can be slaughtered, for which a fit-for-slaughter certificate is required.

It is for this reason that the Madhya Pradesh Act has attracted huge attention from legal experts. "The whole burden-of-proof clause goes against the fundamental tenet of criminal law, that is, you are innocent until proven guilty," Vijay Hiremath, a Mumbai-based lawyer with the Centre for Access to Rights, was quoted as saying in a national daily. He further said that in criminal law, the onus was on the state to prove the accused guilty and that the Madhya Pradesh cow slaughter law put the accused on a par with the accused under anti-terror laws.

"This is a draconian law. What was the need to give such sweeping, unbridled powers to a head constable? A local constable of any police chowki can now enter your house, restaurant, kitchen or hotel on the basis of mere suspicion," said S. Japhet of the National Law School of India University, Bangalore, to a newspaper about the Act's long-lasting impact and its probable misuse.

However, the State government claims that the animal traffickers' lobby has been trying to sabotage the stringent anti-cow slaughter law. "Even before the new law has come into force, there is propaganda about its possible misuse in the State at the behest of bovine traffickers," Minister for Animal Husbandry Ajay Vishnoi said in a statement. Vishnoi, who belongs to the RSS cadre, has been instrumental in bringing the amended Bill in the

Assembly.

Chouhan and his aides have been saying that the anti-cow slaughter Act was necessary to boost the agrarian economy that is hugely dependent on cattle. His government has stepped up its efforts to set up a 200-hectare gaushala (cow pen) – the first of its kind in the country – to conserve “desi” cow progeny. This is in accordance with the Chief Minister's proclamation in 2006 of the cow as a “holy animal”. Also, Chouhan has allocated huge sums of money to establish state-run gaushalas.

The Congress, as the principal opposition, has been lackadaisical in its resistance to the government's actions, considering the large Hindu vote as against the little over 6 per cent Muslim vote in the State.

Ajay Singh, Leader of the Opposition, though, has been opposing the move in the Assembly. “This is a regressive Act meant to employ an intimidating mechanism against the minorities. One should ask the government about the amount of money that is going into the gaushalas, and a fact-finding team should inquire into why they are in such a bad shape,” Singh told Frontline.

M. FARUQUI



IN A `GAUSHALA' on the outskirts of Bhopal.

Many political leaders in the State have been pointing towards the alleged corruption in gaushalas and the poor condition of the cattle there. A Gau Seva Sadan and a Gau Samvardhan Board have been established in the State, and the gaushalas are run by the NGO Jan Abhiyan Parishad, alleged to be under the control of the State's BJP leaders. Gau Raksha Samitis (cow protection committees) have also mushroomed all over the State under the government's patronage.

The Bill comes 10 years after the Ganj Basoda riots, which played a crucial role in polarising Hindu votes in favour of the BJP and which eventually ensured its victory in the 2003 Assembly elections. Activists of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) torched Muslim property and households in Ganj Basoda, a small hamlet in Vidisha district, alleging that members of the minority community were slaughtering cows secretly despite a ban. A Muslim trader who transported meat from Sagar district to Ganj Basoda for local consumption was beaten up badly, and this led to communal conflagrations. It was later found out in a laboratory that

the contested meat was not beef.

Similar riots have broken out over the last five years in the Burhanpur, Rahatgarh, Raisen, Jhabua and Indore regions. In most cases, Bajrang Dal activists roughed up people from the Muslim community for alleged cow slaughter. Ironically, buffalo slaughter is permitted in the State, and Madhya Pradesh is one of the biggest exporters of buffalo meat in India.

Saffron agenda

Yogesh Diwan of the People's Research Society, an independent research organisation in Bhopal, points out the larger issues involved. "The BJP government has gradually been Hinduising the State. It reflects in the names of government schemes, its propaganda in tribal regions, and the extracurricular syllabus in government schools," he said.

His comments are not off the mark. The government issued an official order in February 2006 declaring that government employees had no restriction in joining the RSS as it was purely a "cultural organisation". The names of government schemes, such as Laadli-Lakshmi (for the empowerment of the girl child), Jalabhishek (water resource and harvesting programme), and Devputra (for the promotion of education), have connotations of Hindu rituals and ceremonies.

In early 2007, the yogic practice of surya namaskar (paying obeisance to the sun) was made mandatory in government schools. In 2009, the government declared that students would recite a Sanskrit hymn, the Bhojan Mantra, before midday meals. In April 2011, Chouhan announced that Gita saar (essence of the Gita) should be compulsorily taught to all students. When a few organisations contested this in court, a single-member Bench upheld the government's decision.

Cities such as Maheshwar and Ujjain, which figure in Hindu mythology, have been declared pavitra nagars (holy towns). There is a consistent campaign by the government to change the nomenclatures of historical periods from A.D. and B.C. to Bikram Samvat and Shakh Samvat.

Saraswati Vandana and other Hindu hymns and yajnas are compulsorily taught in RSS-run Ekal Vidyalayas. The anti-communal activist L.S. Hardenia in Bhopal told Frontline that the number of such communal institutions had increased dramatically in the past decade. He said that State-run universities had turned into Sangh-Parivar propaganda laboratories, and tribal gods and goddesses were being appropriated into the Hindu pantheon.

Father Anand Muttungal of the Catholic Church told Frontline that there had been systematic violence against Christians in the State in the past eight years of BJP rule. He said the Bhopal police chief had issued a secret circular to all police stations in 2010 directing officers to collect information about Christian institutions in their jurisdiction. The order was withdrawn after it got leaked to the media.

Father Muttungal said Sangh Parivar activists had been misusing the Right to Education Act and unnecessarily keeping a check on all Christian educational institutions in the State. Significantly, the State government is awaiting presidential consent to a stronger anti-conversion law and has been demanding an anti-terror law on the lines of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, or TADA.

After the Gau Raksha Abhiyan, which was started in the 1960s as a nationwide programme, was stymied, the Sangh Parivar moved to a much more nuanced and successful political strategy of working slowly in the hinterlands of India.

Anti-cow-slaughter and anti-conversion Acts are, perhaps, a part of that larger political strategy. They function as mechanisms to intimidate the minority communities even if they are not used against them.

Beef-eating in India

Ironically, a report titled "Livestock Information, Sector Analysis and Policy Branch" by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) says that the most consumed meat in India is beef. The annual consumption of beef in India is 26 lakh tonnes as compared to six lakh tonnes of mutton and 14 lakh tonnes of pork. According to data by the United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA), India exports 1.28 million tonnes of beef, making it the third largest exporter of beef in the world. In Bhopal alone, two of the biggest slaughterhouses (of buffaloes and goats) are run by members of the Hindu Bania and Jaina communities.

Members of the Qureshi community, which has been traditionally involved in the buffalo and goat meat trade, told Frontline that they feared that they would be unnecessarily harassed and picked up on mere suspicion. The immediate impact of the Act, however, would be on Dalits trading in leather and cow fat. "The Dalits, mostly Chamars, get leather and fat from dead cows, and sometimes they, too, slaughter old and abandoned cows to take leather. I have found such cases in my office many times. These incidents have been the pretext for the Sangh Parivar to target the minorities," said Mohammad Ibrahim Qureshi, former Chairman of the Minority Commission in the State.

The cumulative impact of the Act is yet to be seen, but indications are that there will be increasing stigmatisation of the minority communities