

TOWARDS GORAKSHA: THE SOCIO ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE OF COW PROTECTION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Religion is an important part of Indian culture. The major religion of India is Hinduism. It has been said that the Goraksha or Cow Protection is one of the major religious activity of Hinduism. India has many experiences of religious tensions with the issue of cow protection. In this article, I have tried to pinpoint that Cow Protection was started in a certain social need in an emerging cultivating society, not as a ritual practice. Cattle killing and beef eating was a part of Brahminism and the cow protection was started by Non-Hindu sects Buddhism and Jainism, latterly supported by some lower caste of Hindus. A cow was very useful animal in the pre-modern agricultural society, where the modern technology of plough does not exist. After getting involvement into cultivation due to royal land grants, Brahmins disapproved cattle killing.

KEYWORDS: *Cattle Killing, Cow Protection, Agriculture, Royal Land Grant, Brahmin*

INTRODUCTION

Beef is a well-known meat in Indian dietary. The flesh of the cow and in India buffalo also called beef. Beef is very delicious meat and has been a cheaper organic nutrition for a long time in India. Normally most Hindus, Sikhs, and Parsis in India today even when they ate flesh, desist from consuming beef¹. But the Muslim and Christian of India has no taboo on it. One of the ritual ceremonies of Muslim is 'Eiduzuha'[#], where they sacrifice a cow and similar bovines. Some tribal people also consume beef. But in the political ground Cow killing and Beef eating has been a touchy issue in contemporary India. Some major political parties are continuously propagating against cow slaughtering and when they came into government they tried to prohibit the cow killing by passing act and inspired people in cow protection (Goraksha) in the name of Hinduism. But cattle killing were a major part of Vedic Hinduism from very earliest time. Anti-Brahmanism Protestant religion including Buddhism and Jainism first argued against the random animal killings and started a Goraksha movement. The Brahmin community adopted it years later in a certain background.

¹ K. T. Achay, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food*, P: 18

[#] Eid Uz Zuha, also called the "Sacrifice Feast", is the second of two Muslim holidays. . It honors the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son, as an act of obedience to God's command. Before Abraham sacrificed his son, God provided a male goat to sacrifice instead. In commemoration of this, an animal is sacrificed and divided into three parts: one third of the share is given to the poor and needy; another third is given to relatives, friends and neighbors; and the remaining third is retained by the family. In the Islamic lunar calendar, *Eid Uz Zuha* falls on the 10th day of Dhu al-Hijjah.

PRE-VEDIC CATTLE KILLING

Long before the Vedic immigration, we have it on the authority of H. D. Sankalia (1967) that throughout the Pleistocene period bones of the cow/ox has been discovered more frequently than of any other animal². Skeleton of cow and bull has been found from the Harappan site and many of those are burned and of younger animals. So there was no social prohibition in flesh eating³. The people of South India, before the advent of Aryans, relished beef, as reflected in the literature of Sangam age⁴. The Perumpanuru describes a fat bull being slaughtered in the open, and even the meat of the buffalo was eaten⁵. So Beef eating was practiced before the advent of Aryans.

RIG VEDIC CATTLE KILLING

Vedic literature is the main source of Brahminical religion. The first textual reference of eating beef is found from the oldest (religious) literature of India, the Rig-Veda. The linguistic evidence firmly tells us that the Indo Aryans are of the Indo-European family of languages and there is a linguistic relationship with some ancient languages of west Asia and Iran, as well as some that took shape in Europe. Indo-European is a reconstructed language, working back from cognate languages. Indo-European speaking people had central Asia as their original habitat. Gradually, over many centuries, they branched out and as pastoralist spread far afield in search of fresh pastures. Some migrated to Anatolia, others to Iran, and some among the latter migrated to India from Indo-Iranian borderline and Afghanistan⁶. So The Aryans were accustomed to pastoral lifestyle from the very beginning. The Avesta bears ample testimony to animal sacrifice and the Vedic term yajna (= sacrifice) occurs in the Avesta as yasana. There were three kinds of Yajna and one of them is the public sacrifice, in which animals were killed and its meat was offered to the gods. After that, it was eaten by the patrons and their guests and later by the person performing the sacrifice.

The main Vedic sacrifice was of Cattle, natural in a predominantly pastoral society. Professor D N Jha (2009) argues that the 'holiness' of the cow is a myth and its flesh was very much a part of the early Indian non-vegetarian food regimen and dietary tradition, though attitudinal divergences to beef consumption are also reflected in Indian religious and secular texts spread over a long period. The term 'gau', meaning cow, in different declensions occurs 176 times in the family Books of the Rigveda and the total number of occurrences of cattle-related terms in the text could be around 700. A wealthy person was called goman, the tribal chief was called gopati, the inter-tribal war was called gavisti etc. So cow was an important animal at that time. The Rigveda frequently refers to the cooking of the flesh of the ox for offering to gods, especially Indra, the greatest of the Vedic gods. He states: they cook for me 15 plus 20 oxen. Second important god Agni is described in the Rigveda as one whose food is the ox and the barren cow⁷.

The cow is spoken of as aghnya in the Rigveda. Aghnya means 'one who does not deserve to be killed'. From this, it is argued that this was a prohibition against the killing of the cow. This conclusion is based on a misreading and misunderstanding of the texts. The adjective Aghnya applied to the cow in the Rigveda means a cow yielding milk and therefore not fit for being killed.

² H.D: Sankalia, *The Cow In History*

³ Dilip kumar chakrobarty, *Bharotborsher Pragitihis*. P: 106.

⁴ K. T. Achay, *Ibid*. P: 18

⁵ K. T. Achay, *Ibid*. P:18

⁶ Romila Thapar, *Early India*.P: 105

⁷ D. N. Jha, *Cow and the Elusive Hindu Identity*

LATER VEDIC CATTLE KILLING

The later Vedic texts frequently refer to ritual cattle slaughter. Gopataha Brahman alone mentions twenty-one yajanas. Agnyadheya, which was a preparatory rite, preceding all public sacrifices, required a cow to be killed. The cow sacrifice was an important component of the rajasaya and vajapeya sacrifice. Animals were killed not only in public sacrifices but also in ordinary and domestic rites of daily life. The reception of the guest is called arghya or madhuparka, in which cow was killed for honoring them. The killing of the cow for the guest had grown to such an extent that the guest came to be called 'Go-ghana', which means the killer of the cow. The cow was also killed on festive occasions like marriage (aghashtanyate gavo. Rigveda X.85 13C.) Cattle killing were also intimately connected with the cult of the dead like cremation and honoring Manes (shraddhas). The central point of this rite was that the Manes were to be well fed and this could be possible only if beef was offered to them. So it is clear from the textual reference that early Aryans and their successors were allowed to kill cattle or eat beef. Archaeological evidence also testifies to the continuity of this practice through the first millennium BC. At Hastinapur (Meerut), for example, the bones of cattle along with other animal have been found. A substantial number of them range in date from the eleventh to about the third century BC.

OPPOSITE VOICES

First questioning about the effectiveness of animal sacrifice came from the Upanishadic thought and it may have culminated in the doctrine of Ahimsa, which is the defining trait of two Protestant philosophies Buddhism and Jainism. The main doctrine of Jainism is that all nature is alive. Everything, from rocks and plants to gods, has an eternal soul, or jiva. So Jainism is non-violence. The first use of the term Goraksha (Gorakkha) is seen in Pali literature. According to Pali literature, 'Gorakkha' means cattle rearing. Animal husbandry is considered to be one of the best performing works (utkrishta karma) in Buddhist literature. There is probably a reason for choosing the term Gorakkha. Due to the Brahminical sacrifice, a large number of cattle were killed. It likely to reacted strongly to the livestock and agricultural economies. Therefore, Buddhist thinkers have consciously applied the term 'cow protection' to show the economic importance of livestock in agricultural society⁸. The Following quotation suffices to prove the economic basis of the disapproval of beef-eating. Archaic verses ascribed to the Buddha read, "Cattle are our friends, just like parents and other relatives, for cultivation depends upon them. They give food, strength, freshness of complexion and happiness. Knowing this Brahmins of old did not kill cattle."⁹ But the emphasis on non violence by Buddha was not blind and rigid. He did taste beef and it is well known that he died after the meal with pork in Chunda's invitation

BRAHMINICAL APPROACH TOWARDS COW PROTECTION

There are several evidence of the eating flesh in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. According to Vanaparba of Mahavarata two thousand cows have slaughtered every day for king Rantideva's kitchen and he earned fame in the serving food with beef to brahmins¹⁴. According to the Mahabharata, the river Charnvati or Chambal originated from the blood of slaughtered cow¹⁵. Ramayana's Sita wishes to worship the river Yamuna with a thousand cows and a hundred jars of wine during the crossing of it¹⁶. Bharadvaja welcomes Rama by slaughtering the fatted calf. Opposite voice is also there in the epics. In Mahabharata, some passages display reservations about eating meat. A Brahmin asks a pious butcher how he

⁸ Ranaveer chakraborty, *Bharot Itihaser Adiporbo*. P: 154

⁹ *Sutta-nipata*, 295-6.

can follow such a cruel profession. Another passage contains a much stronger condemnation: A wretched man who kills living creatures for the sake of those who eat them commits the great sin. The eater's sin is not as great. That wretched man who, following the path of religious rites and sacrifices as laid down in the Vedas, would kill a living creature from a desire to eat its flesh, will certainly go to hell.¹⁸ The Arthasashtra lays no stress whatever in the yajna though its writer was a Brahmin. Puranas, whose writings were not demarked in any way before the Guptas, do not condemn strongly the killing of the cow¹⁰. Only Nardiyamahapurana prohibits the cow slaughtering in the honour of guests or in sacrifice. But there was no veneration the cow.¹¹

Around the middle of the first millennium A.D., the Brahminical attitude towards cow slaughter became changed. Dharmashastras now began to show their disapproval of the cattle killing. Early Medieval lawgiver speakers of customs that have to be given up in the Kali age called kalivarjyas²⁰ and these include the cattle killing¹². Vayasasmriti (600A.D.-900A.D.)¹³ states that a cow killer is untouchable (antyaja) and talking to him is a sin. Parasara says a Brahmin who eats beef is required to performed penance and who kill a cow and hides his offense goes to the worst hell. The law book of Devala states¹⁴ that if a Brahmin is forced by someone to kill a cow is required to perform a penance. But there is no clear argument about the eating of dead cow in the law books¹⁵. One statement is found from Sankhasmriti¹⁶ that a fifteen days penance for them who eat a dead calf.¹⁷

Why Cattle Killing was Disapproved?

What was the reason behind the change of Brahminical attitude is need to be observed. Al Biruni, an eleventh-century visitor tried to discover the original reason¹⁸. According to him, some Hindus say that it had been forbidden on account of the weakness of men, who are too weak to fulfill their duties, as also the veda, which originally was only one, was afterward divided into four parts, simply for the purpose of facilitating the study of it¹⁹.²¹ Other Hindus told him that the Brahmins used to suffer from the eating of cow's meat. For their country is hot,²⁰ the inner part of the bodies are cold, the natural warmth becomes feeble in them, and the power of dilation is so weak that they must strengthen it by eating the leaves of betel after dinner and by chewing betel-nut.²¹ The hot betel inflames the hit of the body, the chalk on the betel lives dries up everything wet, and the betel nut act as an astringent on the teeth, the gums, and the stomach. So they forbade it.²² There are no evidence of climate change, no evidence of the medical discovery of avoiding beef. Moreover classical Indian texts on medicine suggest the therapeutic use of beef. Charaka (1st-2nd century) recommends a gruel prepared with beef gravy soured with pomegranates as a remedy for intermittent fever (charaka sutra, II.31.). He describes the virtues of beef for disorders of wind, catarrh and irregular fever (charaka sutra, XXVII.79.). Susruta

¹⁰ Francis Zimmermann, *The Jungle and Aroma of Meats*. P: 189 (Manu X. 105-9)

¹¹ D. N. Jha, *The Myth Of The Holy Cow*, P: 91

¹² Patrick Olivelle, *Abhaksya and Abhojya: An Exploration in Dietary Language*

¹³ Colleen Taylor Sen, *Feasts and Fasts A History of Food in India*, P: 80

¹⁴ Rajnikant Shastri, *Hindu Jati ka Utthana aur Patan*, P: 91

¹⁵ S Sorensen, *An Index to the Names in the Mahavarata*, P: 593-4

¹⁶ D. N. Jha, *Ibid*. P: 97

¹⁷ Rajendra Lal Mitra, *Indo Aryans*, Vol: 1, P: 396

¹⁸ Quoted in, Colleen Taylor Sen, *Feasts and Fasts, A History of Food in India*, P: 109

¹⁹ Rajendra Lal Mitra, *Ibid*, P: 385

²⁰ For details see P V Kane, *History of Dharmasashtra*, III, P: 925-6.

²¹ Al Biruni, *India*, P: 238

²² Al Biruni, *Ibid*, P: 238

(3rd-4th century) tells us that beef proves curative in dyspnoea, catarrh, cough, chronic fever. He speaks of pregnant women craving for ox meat—a craving that was predictive of the vigor and endurance of the child in the womb. Vagbhata (7th century) speaks similarly about the curative powers of the beef.

Al-Biruni also did not agree with the above myth. But it is fact that at his time Hindus left the beef-eating practice. According to him cow is the animal which serves man in traveling by carrying loads, in agriculture in the works of ploughing and sowing, in the household by the milk and the product made thereof. Further, the man makes use of its dung, and in winter even of its breath. therefore it was forbidden to eat cows' meat; as also Alhajjaj forbade it when people complained to him that Babilonia became more and more desert.²³

The agricultural economy started in India from the beginning of the first millennium B.C. And why did the law-giver take almost 1500 years to forbid cow killing? According to Vedic varna system, Brahmanas' duty was Vedic reading and rituals. Agriculture views as a distinctive occupation of the Vaishyas and in early days it confined to them. The founder of Goraksha movement, Goutam Buddha had his most of the followers and dinners from vaishya varna. He gave importance to those social movements like cow saving, which help the agricultural development. From the beginning of first millennium CE scenario slowly became change due to agrahara system. Royal land grants to priest class and the religious institution were called agrahara. Ashoka's edicts do not speak of any land grants. The earliest epigraphic evidence belongs to the first century BC²⁴. Satavahan king Gautamiputra Satakarni granted land to Buddhist scholars in the second century A.D. From the middle of the fourth century A.D. onwards such grants in favor of the Brahmins became frequent²⁵. This resulted in a qualitative change in

Agrarian society. Now the priestly class is involved directly in agriculture. Brahmins then realized the importance of livestock in agriculture. As a result, the lawgiver decided to disapprove and forbade the cattle killing. This rejection of cattleslaughter may have encouraged the establishment of cow shelters. An inscription (dated 883-4 A.D.) records the gift of a cow shade or gosala by certain Chidanna²⁶. The later Pallava king Perunjinga refers to the gift of cows to a gosala. This cow shade, named Kulottungan-tiru-gosalai, was established and in the name of Chola king Kulottunga iii (1179-1216 C.E.)²⁷. An inscription dated 1374-5 A.D. speaks of the construction of a gosala in the premises of the Padmanabhasvamin temple at Tiruvanthapuram²⁸. It indicates a link between the cow shelter and temple.

In China also cattle were reserved. Mao Tse Tung's report of March 1927 on the peasant uprising in Hunan says, "Draught-oxen are a treasure to the peasants. As it is practically a religious tenet that 'Those slaughter cattle in this life will themselves become cattle in the next', draught oxen never be killed. Before coming to power, had no means of stopping the slaughter of cattle except the religious taboo. Since the rise of the Peasant Associations, they have extended their jurisdiction even over cattle and have prohibited their slaughter in the cities. Of the six beef shops in the county town of Hsiangtan, five are now closed and the remaining one sells only the beef of sick or disabled cattle. Cattle slaughter is prohibited throughout the county of Hengshan. A peasant whose cow stumbled and broke a leg had to consult the Peasant

²³ Al Biruni, *Ibid*, P: 238

²⁴ Ram Saran Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society*, P: 19

²⁵ Ram Saran Sharma, *Ibid*, P: 20

²⁶ *Epigraphia Indica*, XXI, no35, P: 207

²⁷ *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXIV, No: 22, P: 159

²⁸ *Epigraphia Indica*, IV, No: 27B, P: 203

Association before he dared kill it.....”²⁹

First state effort to stop arbitrary cattle killing came from Mauriya dynasty. Emperor Asoka after converting to Buddhism did not turn to vegetarianism. He tried to restrict the number of the animal to be killed for the royal kitchen. He did not forbid all killing; only a special list of animals and birds were protected. The ox, cow, and bull are not protected, except the sandakan bull³⁰. But He expresses his sadness for any kind killing and appeals to the masses to stop it. Kautilya also does not permit the killing of the calf, bull, or milch cow. He prescribed a nominal fine of 50 panas. Emperor Asoka tried to sift the balance of power from priest to non-priest classes like cultivators, traders etc. by accepting and propagating Buddhist nonviolence doctrine. It was one reason behind his success in state progress. The fall of the Maurya kingdom is dated in 185 B.C. It is too interesting that around the starting of first millennium C.E. Hindu law books (mentioned earlier) tried to restrict cattle killing. The Only Vedic ritual killing was permitted by them. So the Brahmin classes started to avoid cattle killing as much as possible to retain their hegemony in the society.

It is difficult to explain the Indian History without religious interpretation. Beside the mention of cattle Killing Rig Veda also says, ” The Cow is heaven, The Cow is Earth, The Cow is Vishnu, Lord of Life/ Both Gods and mortal men depend for life and being on the cow/ She hath become this Universe; all that the Sun surveys are she” (X.10)³¹. It literally means that the cow was venerated as a cosmic symbol, universal mother and the source of life and nourishment. A food Historian Colleen Taylor Sen argues that this Quasi-religious attitude may be the starting point for what later became the veneration of the cow, an end to its role as a sacrificial victim and a ban on eating its meat³². It is true that the cow products like milk and ghee became part of religious rituals. But in which society cow was slaughtered frequently it is impossible to venerate it. So, the above observations are from the pastoral sense, where the cow was only wealth and there was nothing without the cow.

Al Biruni said,”Some Hindus says that many things which are now forbidden were allowed before the coming of Basudeva, eg. the flesh of cows”³³. Basudeva Krishna emerged as one of the incarnations or avatar of Lord Vishnu. Not only Krishna but also Buddha, Jain Tirthankara Rishava and some totemic deities was turned into an avatara of Vishnu. It was a part of religious syncretism, more clearly, in taking of regional deities into Brahminism. It was due to royal land grants. Brahmin became landed intermediary and spread across the peripheral area. Their duty was to control the masses and collect agricultural surpluses. So they had to compromise with the local cult and to include local deities into the Brahmin culture. Basically, the glory of Vaishnavism has been seen the reigns of the Guptas.³⁴The divine cowherd Krishna emerged as a major focus of devotional worship within Vaishnavism. The Krishna cult was popular in Yadav community and is unavoidable. Their main capital is cattle. So there was a pressure from bellow to avoid cattle killing.

²⁹ D D Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India*, P: 103

³⁰ D D Kosambi, *Ibid* P: 162

³¹ Colleen Taylor Sen, *Ibid*, P: 40

³² Colleen Taylor Sen, *Ibid*, P: 40

³³ Al Biruni, *Ibid*, P: 49

³⁴ N N Bhattachariya, *Dhormo O Sangoskriti : Prachin Varotiyo Prekkhapot*, P : 137

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, Indian economy was started to shift from pastoral to the agricultural economy from the middle of the first millennium BC. In this new scenario, people need to protect the livestock which was very important to run this more reliable economic process. The Third caste (Vaishyas) of the Four Caste system of ancient Indian society was directly associated with agricultural production. And the Kshatriya or ruling classes only have the right to claim the surpluses of the production. Cultivators and Ruling classes had no way except cow protection. Non-violent Buddhism and Jainism converted it into a social movement. The Yadav community was also against cattle killing. Observing the changing balance of the society Brahmins tried to avoid cattle killing. Getting land ownership by royal land grant, they involved in agriculture and they had to protect such an important animal for ploughing. Thus Brahmins involved themselves in cow protection doctrine and legalised it by imposing penalties. So it is meaningless to think Goraksha as a religious practice.

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