

Beef and Beliefs:**Analysing the Impact of Cow Nationalism on India's Multiculturalism**

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India and its association with multiculturalism date back to time immemorial. The land is home to people of diverse beliefs and cultures. However, this multicultural sense of unity in diversity is corroding since the advent of religious extremists in the land's political sphere. These groups are attempting to revive the old colonial policy of 'divide and rule.' A close analysis of the scenario reveals that people's religious sentiments are being invoked through the use of 'invented traditions' to incite violence and hostility. The doctrine of cow sanctity appears to be one such invented tradition that is being used politically. In the name of protecting cows, people are being persecuted across the nation. This study is thus an attempt to analyse and understand how the issue of the beef ban contributes to the smothering of India's multiculturalist spirit. The research will analyse documentaries and research articles to understand the scenario in its actual graphic.

Keywords: Beef Ban, Nationalism, Multiculturalism, Fanaticism, Cow Vigilantes, Extremism, Cow nationalism.

India, as a nation of extreme diversity, is occupied by various groups of people who differ in language, race, ethnicity, beliefs, and many other aspects. Multiculturalism has always been a trait of the Indian subcontinent. Historically, this dates back to time immemorial. The Indian culture eternally has had a welcoming attitude and inclusiveness, as expressed in the ancient sayings like "Atithi Devo Bhava" and "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam". Even though densely populated by the practitioners of Hinduism, when one looks at the historical timeline of India, they can see that various dynasties of differing religious backgrounds have ruled India, and people have coexisted in peace and harmony.

The Indian Hindu Culture has a rich historical heritage for its belief systems. Being the land of the Vedas and Upanishads, there are thousands of doctrines of faith and rituals, the

Hindu belief in the sanctity of cows is one such faith. Unlike the other similar beliefs, the debate on cows has created social and political unrest in pre-independent and post-independent India. Violent outbursts were rare and scattered across time. However, there has been an increase in the number of such cases in recent times. In contemporary India, people who do not belong to the majority endorsing the Brahminic norm of cow sanctity are getting lynched in public. Those who oppose this belief of cow sanctity identify this as a Brahminic construct.

Archaeological records show sufficient evidence for the existence of cattle in the Indian subcontinent. In the Vedic ages, cattle had a significant role in ritual performances. Sacrifice was the cornerstone of the Vedic rituals. Cattle were the chief sacrificial objects, and their products like milk, ghee (butter oil), etc. were the foremost oblations to the Vedic deities.

The records also present that the doctrine of ahimsa appeared first in the Chandogya Upanishad. The primary reason behind this was the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism. Further on, the association of the rulers like Asoka of the Maurya dynasty with these religions led to the emphasis on vegetarianism and the prohibition of animal slaughter by law. The Brahmanical revival and the rise of the Krishna cult in the fifteenth century are also very relevant incidents associated with this issue. As the Krishna legend engaged the regular man in India, Krishna's cows turned into the cow mother of each Hindu.

The problem of cow slaughter became an ethnic issue after the establishment of Muslim regimes in India. Some of the rulers like Babar and Akbar of the Mughal dynasty approached the problem with care. They even issued 'farmans' to prohibit cow slaughter to keep the majority population in comfort. The first instance of political usage of the cow was from the Maratha ruler Shivaji, who used it to gain support against his Muslim opposition. The political use continues through various political organizations, the Bharatiya Janata Party, in particular.

In his article, Amar Nath Pal, *The Sacred Cow in India: A Reappraisal*, analyses the historical records to reveal ample evidence for the existence of cattle in the Indian subcontinent. Cattle were considered as a source of food and a measure of wealth throughout the Vedic period. Beyond this, cattle had a significant role in ritual performances. However, the author points out that the ancient religious literature was ambivalent about these traditions.

Ernesto Noronha, in his article, *BJP: Cow as a Political Symbol*, analyses the political interest of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the issue of beef ban. The author looks at how the party uses 'cow' as a secondary and intermittent symbol to incite communal violence. He also attempts to put forth the issue chronologically by citing historical instances, pointing out that the most profitable way that farmers have to earn money after the cattle's lactation period is over is by selling them to butchers.

Noronha's article provides insights into the usage of the cow as a political symbol. He concludes the article by referring to what could be the possible outcome of this usage, concerning the existing political scenario of the time when the piece was composed.

He also briefly explores the conflicts within Hinduism regarding the consumption of beef. The early references in the Vedas and the discrepancy amidst different castes are studied on a surface level. In the article titled *Beef, BJP, and Food Rights of People*, Kancha Ilahia further explores these caste-based distinctions in Hinduism regarding beef consumption-

“Brahminical consciousness makes us forget that the beef-eating castes are also the cattle rearing castes, and their love and affection towards these animals is more intimate than those castes which do not involve themselves in rearing cattle and yet construct a theory of sacred bovine animals.” (Ilahia)

In 1980, Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger came up with their book titled *The Invention of Tradition* which argues that “‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented.” Repetition is quite essential in legitimizing such invented traditions. Hobsbawm has characterized the process of invention of tradition as - “formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition.” A ‘tradition’ is deliberately invented and constructed by a single initiator. The purpose and nature of ‘traditions’, including invented ones, is invariance.

Validating these arguments put forth by Hobsbawm, in his article titled *The Role of Tradition in Historical Developments in Southeast Asia.*, Bernhard Dahm explains how invented traditions get connected to the past-

“...If people are told, for instance, that impulses for new political designs come from their own past, and that, therefore, a desired change or a resistance to innovation has the sanction of a historical precedent.” (Dahm)

In the article titled, *Hinduising India: Secularism in practice*, Omar Khalidi challenges the view that India is a secular nation. He argues that although India grants religious autonomy and freedom in the constitution, in practice, many discriminatory policies and reforms promote Hinduism and aim for Hinduisation of the country. Khalidi brings to light the different educational, cultural and economic policies that validate his arguments. Omar Khalidi warns about this problem and urges to rise against it.

The article titled *Case for Multiculturalism in India*, by Amir Ali vocalizes the need for expression of cultural diversity and the promotion of multiculturalism in a nation like India. Ali studies and points out the pros and cons of provisions and reforms which have been made for promoting harmony. He says that instead of protecting the religious practices of

communities the nation's attention must be given more to the attempts to reflect the cultural diversity in the public sphere and thus make the society more sensitive to cultural pluralism.

Drawing ideas from the texts mentioned above and more resources such as documentaries and newspapers, the study will analyse how cow nationalism is corroding India's multiculturalism. The research attempts to map the issue chronologically through history and associate it with related factors. The paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the problem in a historical, political, and cultural context. The methodology used for analysing the primary texts is the textual analysis and visual methodology.

Cow protection has been an integral part of the political manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Dating back to the 1996 election, BJP focused on the role of Hindutva in its vision for India, creating a more Hindu orientated state by banning cow slaughter, introducing a uniform civil code, and removing the special status of Kashmir. Since then, one can witness BJP leaders making statements on the cow slaughter, beef ban, and cow being related to faith. The view dawns from the self-constructed notion of BJP that beef is the food and interest of the non-Hindu sects, i.e., Muslims and Christians. What the party failed to realize back in the 90s, was that though the consumption of beef is an area of interest of the minority, banning the consumption would affect around 45-50% of the population and soon backfire.

Beef seems to be BJP's 'divide and rule policy', but even the BJP leaders are seen having contradictory views on it. In his Lok Sabha speech back in 1996, late G.G. Swell, an M.P. from Meghalaya spoke about BJP's intolerance and inability to accept that beef is an integral part of the culture and culinary preference of a considerable part of India.

Manohar Lal Khattar, Chief Minister of Haryana, back in 2015 commented on cow ban saying it "is an article of faith" in India, and that,

“Muslims can continue to live in this country, but they will have to give up eating beef. The cow is an article of faith here... Eating beef hurts the sentiments of another community, even constitutionally you cannot do this. The constitution says you cannot do something that offends me; I cannot do something that offends you.”
(“India BJP leader”)

Regardless of the political and social uproar created, both the government and the Cow vigilantes are failing in their mission to protect cows. The Uttar Pradesh government’s initiative of opening cow shelters ended up to be a torture-space for the animals as the protection measures fell flat due to lack of infrastructure and planning for the shelters. Often the cows kept in the shelters are the ones rescued from the slaughterhouses; they are past their breeding age and cannot be used for farming as well. These cow shelters often go out of funds, and these animals fail to get proper food.

In addition to this, BJP’s beef policy seems to alter with states. While in some states, we find leaders being vocal about banning cow slaughter, in other states, we find them speaking for the consumption. In 2017, the BJP candidate from the Malappuram constituency in Kerala, N. Sriprakash, was seen making promises like “Give me votes, I will start good slaughterhouses here”.

“What is the problem in choosing a food of our liking? Beef has not been banned... Life imprisonment is being awarded only for cow slaughter. Beef has not been banned. I will try my best to start good slaughterhouses here, which provide quality beef, if you vote me to power. It was during the Congress rule that beef ban was imposed in many states. In some states, even the meat of dead cattle becomes food, which is unfortunate. Please don’t mistake me as someone who stands for beef ban.”
(“If I win”)

The nature of cow sanctity as an ‘invented tradition’ by the privileged Brahminic castes can be explored based on all these arguments. Invented traditions often serve the function of establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities. They may be used to establish or legitimize institutions, status or relations of authority, and there is some whose primary purpose is socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems, and conventions of behaviour. All invented traditions use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion.

The invented traditions, just by the invocation of an individual’s or a community’s past, becomes an integral part of their present and future. This is often not recognized by the individual or community as this invocation is not explicit. There are many instances where a tradition that people follow is an invented one, and they do not realize it. As the idea of cow sanctity has a single origin in the ancient brahmin circles, and it was through their repetition and ritualization that this doctrine got carried ahead in time, cow sanctity can be understood as an invented tradition from these articles.

Contrary to popular belief, many scholars have pointed out that cow sanctity was never a part of Vedic culture. According to the distinguished Indologist and Sanskritist, W Norman Brown,

“At the close of the Vedic period, the cow was still an article of food and was appreciated for that reason, as well as for its other economic values. The doctrine of the cow’s sanctity does not appear at all in Vedic literature. The doctrine gets a strong position by the time of the completion of the Mahabharata... Its position was made firm doctrinally in Brahmanical circles in the period of composition of the Puranas, and it becomes widely diffused among the Hindu community, gaining ever-increasing prestige from then on.”

(Brown)

Thus, one can generalize that often it is the 'political elites' who come up with symbols to feed their political profit. The cow is one such symbol brought into the political context by the BJP. They exploit it to make people identify themselves with the Hindutva ideology. The party often backs up these vigilantes by providing them with the assistance of the local police and inviting them to attend the political rallies.

From the time of the creation of the constitution, the nation's leaders have tried to recognize, protect, and promote cultural differences. However, religious extremists through the use of invented traditions like that of cow sanctity make this hostile. They use these symbols to incite communal violence and corrode the essential spirit of multiculturalism in the nation.

The overt communalisation of cow sanctity for political gains has led to violent confrontations between Hindu and Non-Hindu communities in the past-decades. The Hindu extremists have formed cow vigilante groups and have been attacking minorities who consumed or traded cows for a living. From making statements like "If you slaughter cows, we will slaughter you", to going in a reckless killing spree in the name of 'Gau-Raksha', these extremists often take law in their hands. They raid highways during the nights, often accompanied by the local police, check for people transporting cows, and 'punish' them for allegedly smuggling cows to slaughterhouses.

Till 2012, there was just one such case of mob lynching for cow protection in India, while 2013 documented two such cases. However, the statistics experienced a hike since 2014, after BJP came to power at the centre, the cases have significantly increased. From 2013 to 2020, there have been more than 250 incidents of mob lynchings and more than 40 of these resulted in the death of the victim. There is an underlying feeling of martyrdom in these so-called 'Gau-rakshaks', and they bluntly admit it in interviews. As presented in the documentary *India's 'cow vigilantes'* - *BBC Newsnight*, one can see a sense of pride among the 'Gau-

rakshaks' as if they are doing the right thing and avenging the unrightful for the entire sect of Hindus.

On the victim side of these lynchings are often the minority sects, majorly Muslims. One of the most popular lynching cases is that of Mohammad Akhlaq from Dadri, who was murdered based on the rumour that he had the possession of beef meat. Akhlaq lived in a Hindu majority neighbourhood with a minor Muslim population. The documentary titled *India's cow vigilantes are targeting Muslims* by Vox, tells us that soon after Akhlaq's death most of the Muslim population in the neighbourhood permanently relocated.

The cow vigilantes think on the lines of forming a Hindu nation so much so that they consider any sect opposing their idea as anti-national. Widening the religious and cultural divide, they take aggressive measures to silence the dissent. This, in turn, harms the idea of multiculturalism upon which the nation was built. Though we do not see significant leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi make any comments in favour of cow nationalism, his silence on such incidents of ultra-nationalism and religious fanaticism convey more than his words.

Thus, one can conclude that, through the state's interference in people's food habits, the spirit of multiculturalism is corroding. The nation is becoming intolerant to the beliefs and practices of the minorities. Even though India is secular on paper, secularism and religious harmony are being washed away. The majority has become so intolerant that they are ready to persecute people in the name of protecting cows. Cow sanctity hence becomes an invented tradition used by the political elites to gain votes and incite violence, disintegrating India's multiculturalism.

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