

Of Cows, Sacred And Otherwise

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Part IV of the Constitution contains the Directive Principles of State Policy. These are not justiceable. However, in the words of the Article “ ... the principles therein laid down are nevertheless fundamental in the governance of the country and it shall be duty of the State to apply these principles in making laws “. Article 48 is included in this part of the Constitution and it reads “Organisation of agriculture and animal husbandry – the State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds and prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle”. In other words, the Constitution enjoins the State to prohibit the slaughter of cows and other milch cattle which, according to me, should also include buffaloes as they are the largest provider of milk in the country. Article 51A, which gives the fundamental duties of the citizens of India, enjoins them to develop the scientific temper, humanism and a spirit of inquiry and reform. To the extent that promotion of modern and scientific agriculture and animal husbandry is a duty of the State, the counterpart duty of the citizen is to develop the scientific temper.

There are fifteen States in India which have laws prohibiting cow slaughter and almost all of them have, in the past, been governed by the Congress. Madhya Pradesh, the successor State of CP and Berar, was amongst the first to introduce a legal ban on cow slaughter. The governments of these States were run by a party whose main claim to fame is that it believed in and promoted secularism. The framers of the Constitution, including B.R. Ambedkar, cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be considered to be influenced and guided by orthodox Brahminical thought. In fact Ambedkar was a person of a scheduled caste who embraced Buddhism, who was still catholic enough in his thoughts to marry a Brahmin woman. He was an enemy of orthodox Brahminism and certainly he spent his entire life fighting the horrors of casteism which plagued Hindu society. Despite this he included Article 48 in the Constitution, not because he wanted to please Hindus but because he embraced the scientific temper. He also clearly understood that the main livelihood of the landless and those who worked as bonded labour in the fields of upper caste land owners was the cow or the buffalo that they maintained and whose milk they sold. To them, to other small cultivators, to those who needed draught animals, the cow was more than just sacred -- it was the difference between starvation and a full belly. Even if the rich could afford to breed cattle for slaughter, to the poor man cattle was the means of livelihood, the source of fuel through dried dung cakes, means of fertilising the meagre patch of land that he might own through cow dung manure and, even in death, a source of some income through its hide and bones. The cow was and is an economic asset for those who have nothing else to live on. It is very much a part of the non doctrinaire socialism to which the Preamble to the Constitution refers and upgrading of cattle is a part of the equity built into the Constitution. I am deliberately giving these apparently extreme arguments because in fact our cattle population is our wealth, not concentrated in a few hands but spread evenly through the lower income end of society. It is through cattle and milk that Verghese Kurien transformed rural Gujarat and it is through cattle and milk that Kurien made India the largest producer of milk in the world. The wealth of rural America may come out of the cattle bred for slaughter, but in India it is the milk, the dung and the manure which comes from it which gives strength to our rural society.

Recently the TV, channel, ND TV 24 x 7, organised a discussion on the recent ban by Maharashtra and Haryana on cow slaughter. Represented on the panel were two or three Indian chefs of world renown, some activists who draw their inspiration from a combination of anti religious leftism and a

form of western world view of what they think is modern and best for India, that is, the so called liberals, people who leaned towards the orthodox RSS group of Hindu India and Imam Ahmed Bukhari. It was argued that people have a fundamental right to eat what they want and if people want to eat beef the State has no business to stop them. The liberals, the western minded modernists, the chefs of large hotels which serve mainly a foreign clientele or those well-to-do Indians who feel it is fashionable to ape the west, argued this. As was to be expected the pro Hindu representatives of RSS and BJP leanings strongly supported the ban. Ahmed Bukhari stated that whereas the ban on cow slaughter would adversely affect Muslims butchers, he was happy to live with the situation in which cows are not slaughtered out of respect for the sentiments of the Hindus. No one spoke about the relevance of Article 48 of the Constitution. Not a single person, especially of the liberal lobby, stated that if government was encouraging a ban on cow slaughter it was only acting as required of it by Article 48. The debate followed set lines of arguments in which the vocal pro slaughter lobby was as vociferous as the anti slaughter lobby. The main argument of the liberals was that no scripture prohibited cow slaughter.

The debate almost turned ugly when a thoughtless person asked Bukhari whether, if eating beef by Hindus was acceptable, if a Muslim ate pork would he cease to be Muslim Bukhari argued, but amidst a din, that Islam specifically prohibited the eating of pork, whereas no Hindu scripture specifically prohibited the eating of beef. Therefore, the two situations were not comparable.

It is a fact that the Quran specifically prohibits the eating of pork or any other part of a pig, which is considered unclean and unholy. The Quran also does not permit the eating of crustaceans on the ground that the gills of a fish are tantamount to it having been created as halal whereas a crustacean cannot be killed through halal and the religion enjoins halal as the only acceptable means of slaughter of an animal for eating. This is an exact rendering of the Jewish ban on eating pig's meat and crustaceans and ordaining kosher as the only permissible means of slaughter, exactly like halal. The Christians have not accepted Jewish rules of kosher, but Hindus and Sikhs accept only jhutka or a clean kill as a normal means of slaughter. It is true that Hindu scriptures, if any sacred book can really be defined as Hindu scripture, specifically prohibits cow slaughter, but it is an universal belief held by everyone who considers himself a Hindu that a cow is sacred and that there is no greater sin than to kill a cow. The place of the cow in Hindu belief is such that donating a cow absolves one of all sins to the extent of allowing even a sinner to cross the Vaitarni safely. Therefore, for a Hindu there can be no greater sin than killing a cow and eating its flesh.

Every religion, whether revealed or evolved, has at its core certain symbols of faith which are accepted by all believers. For example, in Christianity there are no idols and yet the Cross has a very special significance because it represents the martyrdom of Christ the Saviour. Christians do not worship the Cross but through the Cross they worship God. Supposing they are prohibited from carrying the Cross. Would this be acceptable to any Christian? The Muslims pray by facing the direction of the Kaaba. Would they cease to be Muslims if they do not face the Kaaba when they are praying? Obviously not, but for every Muslim it is an act of faith that when offering namaz he must face the Kaaba. Guru Govind Singh, the Tenth Guru, ordered that a true Sikh is an amritdhari Khalsa who, because he is a warrior of the Guru, must wear the five symbols of kachh, or drawers, kara, or the bracelet of steel, kirpan, or the ceremonial dagger, kangha, or comb and kesh, or flowing hair and beard. This was so that they could be identified as warriors who could not sneak away from the battle field. Similarly, for Hindus to be recognised as such they may not eat beef. In religion often there is no logic and one either believes or one does not. Therefore, if a Hindu eats beef he cannot really call himself a Hindu, regardless of the justification he may find for himself.

Incidentally, no religion, not even Judaism, Christianity or Islam, specifically enjoins that beef must be eaten. Because Abraham (Ibrahim for the Muslims) was prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Ishaq for the Muslims) at the Lord's behest and Jehovah (Allah for the Muslims) in His infinite mercy replaced Isaac, Ishaq, by a ram, even today on Id-u-Zoha Muslims sacrifice a ram, or billy goat, and eat its meat. Lamb or mutton may have some distant vestige of connection with religion, but that does not make it mandatory to eat it. Therefore, not eating beef is certainly not anti-Islamic. One finds greater problems about how Hindus can extend the ban on cow slaughter to that most important of milk yielding bovine, the placid buffalo. Throughout the year at Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati and certainly at Dusserah in Hindu Nepal and in innumerable Kali temples buffaloes are sacrificed in large numbers and their meat is eaten. Let the Hindus also decide how they will interpret Article 48. Are they prepared to extend the ban to include buffaloes?

The ban on cow slaughter has to be viewed in the context of the constitutional provision and the manner in which we hold our individual beliefs. Hindu sentiments are hurt when a cow is slaughtered. Why should government hesitate in providing for Hindu sentiments just as they have to ensure that the sentiments of the followers of other religions are also protected?
