

D. N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*
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SAFFRON GASTRONOMY

That Jesus roamed the Himalayas, absorbing Vedic wisdom from the gurus he encountered; that the human race originated in Tibet; that the gods reside in the body of the cow, mother of us all—all this has long been taught as established fact in the 20,000 Vidya Bharati schools run under the auspices of the Sangh *parivar*, the hardline Hindu-nationalist network that lies behind India's ruling party, the BJP. The Vidya Bharati agenda has already been introduced into primary and secondary schools in BJP-run states, where education policy is often a pawn in coalition deals with regional parties. In 2001, the Sangh-dominated National Council of Educational Research and Training began deleting and rewriting sections of the history textbooks—removing, among other things, any reference to Indian traditions of eating beef. In January 2002, NCERT produced a new history syllabus, founded on its 'value-based' national curriculum framework for the country's schools, which had proposed introducing courses on Vedic mathematics and a 'spirituality quotient' as a form of academic assessment. On 12 September 2002, the Supreme Court set its seal on the new policy, rejecting the contention that the education system was being 'saffronized' with the dismissal of a petition brought against it by a group of educationalists. Prime Minister Vajpayee, schmoozing with Indian millionaires in New York, greeted the decision with glee—adding, for domestic consumption, 'And if saffronization is taking place, what's wrong with that? *Bhagwa* is a good colour, long associated with the battlefields.' The opposition Congress party announced that it had 'no legal problem' with the judgement.

The teaching of history in post-Independence India, the revisionists argue, has been too 'westernized'—dominated by the 'children of Macaulay'. Instead, they propose to develop 'a sense of belonging in every individual learner', by focusing on 'India's contribution to world civilization'. The Vidya

Bharati narrative that this ambition threatens to draw from is a genuinely postmodern fiction, seamlessly conflating mythology and fact. The Aryan race, indigenous to India, is the nucleus of its proud culture. During the golden age of the Vedic period, the country was the envy of the world; its trade networks spread across the globe, and foreign markets were filled with Indian goods. Its treasure chests flowed with jewels, silver and gold. Marauders and barbarians have always viewed the country with greedy eyes. Bacchus and Dionysus were among the first invaders—they suffered such a crushing defeat that Ancient Greece quaked with terror. After the rout of Darius, Iran could never raise its eyes to India again. Alexander the Great had to beg for Puru's forgiveness.

But Buddhist influence, and the non-violent doctrine of *ahimsa*, weakened the kingdom. Cowardice spread throughout the land. Since the state bore the burden of filling the monks' begging bowls, the Buddhists gained many recruits. The troops guarding the borders grew listless as army morale was sapped. Arab aggressors, sword in hand, imposed their religion, destroying books and temples, humiliating mothers and sisters. Practices of child marriage, *jauhar*, *sati* and *purdah* were defences against Muslim rapaciousness. Under the Moghuls, the country was divided into two classes: minority Muslim rulers, and the vast majority, the long-suffering Hindus, constantly oppressed.

At stake is the creation of a monolithic national narrative, focused around the supposed essence of Hinduism, an unchanging Brahmanical core. The complex social history of the priestly caste—its mutations through the millennia, its class character and the numerous challenges to its hegemony—is drowned out by shrill proclamations of innate Brahmanical purity, of which vegetarianism and, in particular, the immemorial sanctity of the cow are important aspects. The actual treatment of India's often lame and rack-ribbed bovine population—bumbling between the Hyundais and Toyotas, or browsing on street-corner rubbish heaps—is not the issue. As last year's protests by outraged customers at the Mumbai McDonald's make clear, it is the ancient link with Hindu purity that counts.

Yet as Dwijendra Narayan Jha's new work reveals, the connexion is far less ancient than it seems. In contrast to many of the revisionists, Jha has studied the Vedic writings in detail—as his thicket of footnotes reveals—as well as surveying a far wider body of textual and archaeological data. His book—the subject of initial banning orders and ritual burnings—is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature that gives a far more complex picture of ancient India. To the Aryan-speaking, semi-nomadic pastoralists who migrated to northwest India from the area of present-day Iran—and whose prayers and chants are recorded in the earliest extant document of the Subcontinent, the Rigveda, dating from between 1500 and 1000 BC—the

cow was neither sacred nor unslayable. The Aryans' gods—combining, it seems, some of the Avesta deities of Iran, strong-armed Indra and fiery Agni, with the mother goddess and Horned Being of the Indus valley—were particularly partial to offerings of roast ox, goat and beef. Animal sacrifice was a crucial element of their religion. Cattle were also valued for their leather, which was worked up into elaborate trappings for the Aryans' chariots—important symbols of power in a mobile, pastoral world.

The textual evidence for this period relates essentially to northern India. But archaeological excavations have revealed charred and cut cattle bones from virtually all parts of the Subcontinent, suggesting that the consumption of beef, along with mutton, goat, ox and various fowls and fish, was fairly commonplace. At Hastinapura—the ancient capital of the *Mahabharata*, north of Delhi—bone fragments of sheep, buffalo, goat, pig, elephant and short-horned cattle have been found, many of them cut or charred, and dating from the eleventh to the third century BC. The social universe of the sprawling epic—its original nucleus generated around 800 BC—is exuberantly non-vegetarian. One section—the *Vanaparvan*—recounts the daily slaughter of two thousand cows in the kitchens of King Rantideva, renowned for distributing vast quantities of beef and grain to his brahmins. The *Ramayana*, too, contains numerous references to the killing of cattle, both for sacrifice and for food: as she is ferried across the Yamuna, Sita vows to sacrifice a thousand cows and a hundred jars of wine to the river, if Rama keeps his vows.

The later Vedic texts, products of the settled agrarian communities around the Ganga–Yamuna doab, provide detailed descriptions of cattle sacrifice, and make clear that humans (as well as gods) consumed the results. As the *Satapatha Brahmana* comments: 'meat is the best kind of food'. Beef should not only be served to honour important guests or to celebrate a new house, but on far more banal occasions: according to Upanishadic precept a veal stew, served with rice and ghee, could ensure a father the happiness of a long-lived, learned son. That cows were highly valued, a symbol of riches, is not, Jha argues, synonymous with their being either sacred or unslayable.

On the other hand, with the beginnings of caste stratification and mercantile development, there is evidence to suggest that the brahmin's cattle began to acquire a certain degree of inviolability at this time. The cow was the preferred form of *daksina*, or sacrificial fee, paid to the priest, and the later Vedic texts warn of the dire consequences that might befall those who injure or misappropriate the brahmin's kine. 'O king,' cautions the *Artharvaveda*, 'the gods did not give that cow to you to eat. O warrior, do not eat the brahmin's cow, she is not to be eaten.' Such passages should perhaps be seen as brahminical attempts to assert the hegemony of the priestly

caste against *kshatriya* challenges from below. The emergence in the sixth and fifth centuries BC of anti-brahmanical and anti-caste sects and movements—Buddhism and Jainism pre-eminent among them—would seem further indicators of such tensions. Both were founded by members of the *kshatriya*, or warrior caste. Buddhism tended to draw its followers from the mercantile, farming and artisan layers, Jainism from the trading and financial elite. A strength of Jha's work is that his analysis of early brahmanical attitudes is integrated into this wider panorama of Indian practice.

Both Buddhism and Jainism were resolutely opposed to animal sacrifice, and there are many stories of the Buddha counselling brahmins against it. The principle of 'right action' included abstaining from the conscious destruction of any sentient being, while the principle of 'right speech' is illustrated by the protests of the ox, Nandivisala, against the abusive language of his brahmin master. Nevertheless, as Jha points out, the Middle Path soon acknowledged the 'three blameless ways' of eating meat—the beast's slaughter need only be 'unseen, unheard or unsuspected'; in a broadening of the Path, the three were later increased to nine. Among these, presumably, were the contents of the Buddha's last supper, a vexed subject for his followers; although the *Milindapanho* assures us that he did not die from the pork itself, which was 'in good condition, light, pleasant, full of flavour and fine for the digestion', but from 'the extreme weakness of his body'. While the scornful Jains accused the Buddhists of regarding as pure anything that fell into their begging bowls, in practice they too discovered exceptions to the rule of non-slaughter: Jain monks who found themselves in a deserted village, or a settlement of robbers, where meat was the only food on offer, were permitted to tuck in with the rest.

It was not easy to curb the varied appetites of the Subcontinent by priestly precept. The edicts of the third-century BC King Asoka, himself a Buddhist, which prohibited the slaughter of a long list of animals throughout the Mauryan empire—stretching from present-day Afghanistan to Karnataka in the far south—appear to have been ignored; not least in the royal kitchens, where two peacocks and a deer were dished up every day. While the Mauryan court's brahmin adviser Kautilya also proscribed the killing of calves, bulls and milch cows, he fixed the fine for such offences at a nominal 50 *panas*, and still managed to recommend the salutary effects of cow bones as manure.

The legal codes of ancient India are equally equivocal. That of Manu, compiled between 200 BC and 200 AD, sanctions meat-eating in honour of the gods or important guests—indeed, the brahmin who refuses consecrated flesh is condemned to be reborn as a beast for twenty-one existences—while condemning it in less exalted contexts. Manu's code recognized five major sins: first, killing a brahmin; second, stealing; third, drinking liquor; fourth,

having sexual intercourse with a guru's wife; fifth, associating with those guilty of any of the above. Cow slaughter, however, did not feature on the list. Sanskrit medical treatises of the same period are markedly pragmatic. The renowned compilation of Caraka (first–second century AD) prescribes a gruel of beef gravy sharpened with pomegranate juice for fevers, and Susruta (third–fourth century AD) recommends the meat for coughs, catarrhs and 'a morbid craving for food'. Secular literature provides a host of similar references right up to the eighteenth century.

Jha argues, nevertheless, for a distinct shift in attitudes towards the cow, at least in northern India, from around the middle of the first millennium AD. This period—characterized by warring kingly states, social and political instability, a catastrophic decline in trade, the emergence of land as the primary source of wealth and the consolidation of large landholdings by an important brahmanical layer—was understood at the time as the age of Kali, of destruction or decay, necessitating deep changes in social mores. It saw the transition from a sacrificial to an image-based religion, more appropriate to the *kaliyuga*, with the incorporation of the cults of Shiva, Vishnu, and their avatars—the classic Hindu pantheon. The transformation, however, affected the gods rather than the priests. The epoch witnessed the reassertion of brahmanical authority, the emergence of an orthodox Vedanta school of thought, triumphing over its rivals, and the re-writing of the bardic epics as sacrosanct texts.

During the *kaliyuga*, mores acknowledged to have been appropriate in earlier, less troubled times—beef-eating among them—were now condemned, especially when practised by lower castes. In normative literature, the brahman's life and possessions were now consistently represented as more valuable than those of other caste categories. Narratives in several different genres elaborate on the dire consequences of defying these rules—kings who humiliate brahmans invariably come to no good. It seems likely that such grim reiterations were necessitated by a social reality in which brahmanical ideals were actively contested. It is in this context that the cow was co-opted into the survival strategies of the priestly elite.

Yet privilege should not be mistaken for uniform dominance: even within Hinduism—let alone the many other traditions—a wide variety of religious and dietary practices have persisted down to the present day. Jha's fascinating book inevitably tells only a fraction of the story. The vast and complex history of the south, the northeast, the tribal areas and forest regions has still barely begun to be explored. The origins of the current 'Hinduization' of Indian culture, asserting a continuity with a monolithic, unbroken tradition, lie not in the ancient Vedas but in the colonialist confections of nineteenth-century European Indologists who, with their own conceptions of the Aryan race, focused their attentions upon the Sanskrit texts, scanting the many

other regional traditions whose languages they did not know. The concept of an essentially 'Hindu' India was a product of modernity—of tensions induced by the demands of an industrial-capitalist occupying power.

Mass mobilizations around the slogan of the 'holy cow' are a graphic representation of this, as recent scholarship by Gyan Pandey and others has revealed. The first *Gaurakshini Sabhas*—Cow Protection Societies—were launched by the Hindu Arya Samaj in 1882. A network of local groups was established across north and central India in the following decades, targeting not the British authorities but local Muslim communities as source of their ills. Leading donors to the *Gaurakshini Sabhas* were often big landowners, bankers and traders; local *zamindari* landlords, facing declining agricultural returns, sought to hegemonize their recalcitrant tenantry on a communalist basis; priests saw an opportunity to re-establish their spiritual ascendancy; in an age of growing social insecurity and increasing levels of exploitation, a new layer of clerks and petty bureaucrats, undervalued intermediaries between the colonial administration and the populace, found an outlet for the unbearable tensions of their lot; rising castes, seen as only marginally 'clean', could assert a fuller purity by loudly demonstrating their piety on the question of the cow; fakirs and swamis played an essential role. The inept or opportunist decisions of the colonialist authorities—bending now to one reactionary authority, now another, in the name of an 'established usage' that they themselves had overthrown—provided innumerable causes for dispute. The result was a series of provocations—Muslim butchers, herding cows to a wedding feast, beaten or killed, and their kine appropriated—rising to communally incited slaughter before the celebrations of Baqr-Id in Maunath Bhanjan in 1893, of a sort that would pave the way for the disaster of Partition.

There are obvious parallels with the present day. The current hinduization of the curriculum—the stress on 'India's contribution to world civilization', while rigorously stamping out any sense of other civilizations' contributions to India—also comes at a time of intense pressure from outside, with the country thrown wide open to the manipulations of international capital; a drastic reversal, in terms of the self-sufficiency of the Nehru years. While state universities exhibit the symptoms of advanced malnutrition, extra funds have been provided for *kamarkanda* courses to produce certified priests. The expansion of an elite layer of private education—spared the yoga courses and spirituality quotient—has been forcefully promoted by the World Bank. The recent Ambani report on private investment in education enthuses about the possibility of creating a 'competitive, yet co-operative, knowledge-based society', an environment that 'does not produce industrial workers and labourers but fosters [cutting-edge] knowledge workers . . . placing India in the vanguard of the information age'.

Funds from the social sciences, in other words, are to be shifted to IT, to fill the niche in the global market for highly trained software technicians. The scenario is uncannily reminiscent of the British government's Hunter Commission report of 1882, which recommended a switch to technical training for the Indians, on the grounds that liberal education was threatening to produce a critical native intelligentsia, whose thoughts might tend to national independence.

What is abandoned in the NCERT proposals is any concept of education as rational endeavour, or methodologically guided inquiry into the unknown. It could be interesting to introduce Vedic 'maths' into a comparative history of methods of mental arithmetic; to memorize the Sanskrit *shlokas* off by heart is another story. Many of the wildest claims for a martial Hindu civilization come from the websites of NRIs—the enormous Indian diaspora whose wealth and influence, within whichever niche of the domestic class system they hail from, is vastly amplified by their residence abroad. For computer scientists, engineers, investment bankers or development advisers in Buffalo, Manhattan or Des Moines, a Vedic capsule swallowed twice daily may be exactly the required boost for identity-deficiency levels, allowing for a homely sense of smugness as one chooses Chicken McNuggets over Big Mac. But—faced with a complex, uneven, rapidly evolving social reality—it ill equips the mass of India's children to articulate their own collective needs.