

India & Hindutva politicians: Why the Ban on Cow Slaughter is not Just Anti-Farmer but Anti-Cow as Well

Sunday 1 November 2015, by [RAMDAS Sagari](#) (Date first published: 27 October 2015).

Depleting grazing lands, the disappearing role for indigenous cattle breeds in agriculture production as providers of milk, energy, manure and beef, coupled with a ban on cattle slaughter have led to plummeting cattle populations.

Contents

- [Indian cows do better in \(...\)](#)
- [As bullocks are displaced, \(...\)](#)
- [Lessons from a growing buffalo](#)
- [Allow slaughter to save \(...\)](#)

The recent killings of Mohammad Akhlaq, Noman and Zahid Ahmad Bhatt on the claim that they were slaughtering cows is not only an attack on the right to life, livelihood and diverse food cultures but an assault on the entire agrarian economy.

The cynical fetishisation of cows by Hindutva politicians is not only profoundly anti-farmer but, paradoxically, also anti-cow.

What these bigots fail to realise is that the cow will survive only if there are pro-active measures to support multiple-produce based cattle production systems, where animals have economic roles. The system must produce a combination of milk, beef, draught work, manure and hide, as has been the case in the rain-fed food farming agriculture systems of the sub-continent over the centuries.

In meat production systems - whether meat from cattle, buffaloes, sheep, goat, pigs or poultry - it is the female which is reared carefully in large numbers to reproduce future generations, and the male that goes to slaughter. It is only the sick, old, infertile and non-lactating female that is sold for slaughter. In every society where beef consumption is not politicised, farmers know that eating the female bovine as a primary source of meat will compromise future production, and hence they are rarely consumed.

On the other hand, the destiny of a male bovine is clear: it will either become a work animal (bullock), a breeding bull, or be sold for meat - which is the fate of the vast majority. In the end, the male bovine will reach a slaughterhouse. Villages earlier had a system of having one community breeding bull which roamed around servicing village cows that came to heat. Typically, 70% of a cattle herd or sheep/goat flock is female breeding stock; the rest comprises a couple of breeding males, and young male and female offspring.

Indian cows do better in Brazil than India

Today, rural indigenous cows are a rarity in India and community breeding bulls are history. Farmers no longer want to rear cattle, particularly cows. This trend is validated by an analysis of India's livestock census: Between 2003 and 2012, the annual growth of young female bovines – a key indicator of future growth trends of animal populations – on a compound annual growth rate basis declined from 1.51% to 0.94% in indigenous cattle and from 8.08% to 5.05% in crossbred cattle. On the other hand, it increased from 2.12% to 3.13% in young female buffaloes [1].

Whilst India's population of fine indigenous cattle breeds keeps decreasing year by year, Brazil's cattle populations of Ongole, Kankrej and Gir breeds – imported from the Indian sub-continent nearly 200 years ago – keep increasing. We have laws to 'protect' cows, ban cow slaughter and ban the consumption of beef: the whole of the North-East, Kerala and West Bengal have no restrictions on cattle slaughter, nine states allow all cattle slaughter except cows, and the rest have a ban on all cattle slaughter. In Brazil, on the other hand, beef-based cattle production systems are the driving force behind its flourishing indigenous Indian cattle breed populations.

Between 1997 and 2012, according to the government's successive livestock censuses, India's indigenous cattle population declined by over 15% from 178 million to 151 million, less than what we began with at the time of independence (155 million), when all cattle were indigenous breeds. Fifty years of sustained white revolution policy interventions to enhance milk production have actively advocated and financed replacement of indigenous cattle with high yielding breeds. Cross breeds like Jersey and Holstein Friesian now comprise some 21% of India's cattle population. But even India's total cattle population, including crossbreds has increased by a mere 23% (from 1951 to 2012) and stands at 190 million.

In stark contrast, Brazil's cattle population – comprising 80% pure Indian cattle breeds (Indicine) or Indian cattle breed crossed cattle – grew by 74% from 56 million in 1965 to 214 million today. The Gir, which is the favoured dairy breed, comprises 10% of Brazil's cattle population. The Ongole (or Nellore), which is the mainstay of beef production, makes up most of Brazil's cattle population [2]. The Ongole of India, however, is a threatened breed in its own homeland.

While Brazil continues to have acres of lands for their cattle to graze, here in India we have successfully done away with common grazing lands where animals can be put to pasture. In the land of the Ongole, pre-2014 united Andhra Pradesh, permanent pastures and grazing lands declined by 78% from 1.17 million hectares in 1955-56 to 0.56 million hectares in 2009-10. The rate of decline was much faster in the post economic liberalisation decades of 1990-2010 – a time of aggressive industrial growth and Hindutva influence. [3]

As bullocks are displaced, less cows are reared

In today's India, cattle have been displaced from their productive role in agricultural livelihoods: tractors have replaced bullocks/draught animals that were used to plough, thresh, and anchor rural transportation. India's population of work cattle or bullocks declined by 28% between 1997 and 2012. This has been the result of economic policies that have strived to industrialise, and "green" and "white" revolutionise our agriculture and livestock production.

Chemical fertilisers have replaced manure. A shift from diverse food cropping systems of cultivation to mono-cropped production of commodity crops like cotton, sugarcane, and tobacco, or palm oil has depleted crop residues as a rich fodder source, and made bullock ploughing virtually redundant. The

bullock is no longer needed to extract oil from oil seeds (in any case we now import 60% of our edible oil and even poor oil millers have closed shop), extract juice from sugarcane, pull water out of wells or be the main mode of rural transportation.

Hence why should farmers keep indigenous bullocks? Or rear indigenous cows for that matter, which produce bullocks? Once animals stop having an economic value, they stop being reared. Simple.

Lessons from a growing buffalo population

Contrast the sorry state of India's cattle with its thriving buffalo population. Our buffalo population has grown by 21% since 1997. Why? Very simple: buffaloes anchor milk and beef production in India. We are the 2nd largest exporters of buffalo beef in the world [4], with an annual export of nearly 2.4 million tons. Bovine meat contributes nearly 60% of total Indian meat production, as against small ruminants (15%), pigs (10%) and poultry (12%). Buffaloes survive well on limited, coarse, less nutritious crop residues, whilst cattle need more green fodder and green grass. This is evidence itself that given all other conducive input factors for the animal to be reared (primarily feed, fodder, water, ecological adaptability, knowledge, labour, health care and a remunerative livelihood), allowing the slaughter of an animal actually drives its numbers up. The same holds true for goat and sheep. Between 1997 and 2012, the sheep population increased overall by 13%, and goats by 10%, despite a 33-38% slaughter rate.

In short, the secret to flourishing animal populations appears to be meat consumption.

The highly industrialised beef producing nations of the world – the United States, Australia and New Zealand – produce beef by replacing large acres of land where food could be grown to feed human beings, with animal feed. Regrettably, in Latin America, large beef corporations are steadily converting huge tracts of natural prime Amazonian forests, home to indigenous peoples, into grazing lands: in short these systems are unsustainable, contributing hugely to carbon emissions.

India's beef production on the other hand, is one of the most sustainable and least ecologically damaging in the world. Beef is a by-product of buffalo rearing livelihood practices, and not its primary objective, which continue to be milk and milk products. Whilst male buffaloes end up in the slaughter houses, farmers also sell their infertile, old, diseased and non-lactating females. Our animals are not fed on predominantly grain-based concentrate diets, but on crop-residues, and natural vegetation.

Allow slaughter to save the indigenous cow

Threats to impose a nationwide ban on beef consumption and cattle slaughter also ignore the close relationship between those who eat beef and those who look after cattle. In India, cattle have always been relished and their meat is a critical source of nutrition for various communities – including Adivasis, Dalits, Christians, Muslims and several other castes (many of whom are too scared to admit they eat beef).

A Dalit social activist asserts: “The Brahmins and other agraha (upper) castes who are cow worshippers have never in their lives ever grazed the animal, fed it, cleaned its dung or buried its carcass. For all that they have used our labour: we graze, we feed, we clean the sheds and dung, we bury the carcass, and we eat beef.”

“The so-called upper castes visit our hamlets in search of beef, and are scared to publically acknowledge their beef eating practices”, says an adivasi community leader from Telangana. “This year, Hindu families hired cows from us for the Godavari Pushkaralu, because there are no cows left in caste rural Indian villages, where people worship cows and shun beef! We adivasis, on the other hand, eat beef, plough our fields with cattle, and farm with cattle manure; therefore we continue to own cows and cattle herds!”

In this land of the holy cow, depleting grazing resources of common lands and forests, disappearing roles for indigenous cattle breeds in agriculture production as providers of milk, energy, manure and beef, policies to replace indigenous breeds with crossbreds, coupled with a ban on slaughter of cattle in several parts of India, have led to plummeting cattle populations and the cow fast becoming a creature of the past.

There is only one conclusion to be drawn. If you really want to protect the cow, do not ban beef, cattle slaughter and the ecological culture that sustains the bovine economy.

Dr. Sagari Ramdas

P.S.

* “Why the Ban on Cow Slaughter is not Just Anti-Farmer but Anti-Cow as Well”. The Wire. 27/10/2015:

<http://thewire.in/2015/10/27/why-the-ban-on-cow-slaughter-is-not-just-anti-farmer-but-anti-cow-as-we-ll-13849/>

* Dr. Sagari Ramdas is a trained veterinarian and works with the Food Sovereignty Alliance, India. Email: Sagari.ramdas gmail.com; foodsovereigntyalliance gmail.com.

Footnotes

[1] http://www.researchgate.net/publication/272083143_Rising_Milk_Price_-_A_cause_for_concern_on_food_security

[2] <http://www.gsejournal.org/content/47/1/31>

[3] Compendium of Area and Land Use Statistics of Andhra Pradesh 1955-56- 2004-05. Directorate of Economics and Statistics: An Outline of Agricultural Situation in Andhra Pradesh 2007-08. DES. Hyderabad.

[4] http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/Livestock%20and%20Products%20Annual_New%20Delhi_India_9-12-2014.pdf