

# BEEF-EATING IN ANCIENT INDIA

On December 8, 2010, in [Articles, For](#), by sabhlok

By Mahadev Chakravarti, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 7, No. 11 (Jun., 1979), pp. 51-55

**BEEF-EATING was not peculiar to the people of the Western countries alone, but was popular with the Vedic Indians also.** The food items of the Vedic Indian can be gathered from the list of sacrificial victims because what man ate he usually presented to his gods.<sup>1</sup> Practically all the important ceremonies and sacrifices were attended with slaughter of bulls and cows. The *Gomedha* and *Asvamedha* sacrifices are important in this respect. The *Sulagava* sacrifice, in which the bull, as the name implies, seems to have been pierced with a spike or lance to appease Rudra, is described in detail in the *grhyasutras*.

## Restrictions in Vedic Literature

In a hymn of the *RgVeda* it is said that “Indra will eat thy bulls.”<sup>2</sup> In another hymn of the *RgVeda*.<sup>3</sup> Agni is styled *Uksanna* and *Vasanna* i.e. “eater of bulls and barren cows.” Not only for the purpose of sacrifices but for food also, the bovine species were killed in regular slaughter-houses and this is evident from another hymn of the *Rig Veda*<sup>4</sup>. Again, it is suggested in the *RgVeda* that the cow was cut up with a sword or axe.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that the modern Hindu practice of *Jhatka-bali*, that is, severing the head of the animal at one stroke, had not yet come into fashion. **There are ample evidences how the *Rgvedic* people were fond of beef-eating. Even in funeral ceremony beef-eating was considered an essential part.**<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly enough in the same *Veda* the cow is sometimes considered inviolable as indicated by her designation *aghnya* (‘not to be slain’) which occurs sixteen times in the entire *RgVeda*<sup>7</sup> as opposed to three instances of *aghnya*<sup>8</sup> (masculine). **But this fact cannot be regarded as showing that beef-eating was condemned in the *Rgvedic* period.** In this connection, we should point out that the Sanskrit word used for the sacrificial cow is *Vasa* (i.e. ‘sterile cow’) and a milch cow was seldom sacrificed.<sup>9</sup> It is only in this way that one can explain the lavish praise bestowed on the cow in the *RgVeda* where she is described in a number of hymns as “the mother of Rudras, the daughter of the vasus, the sister of Adityas, and the centre of nectar.”<sup>10</sup>

Although we have three references of *aghnya* in the *RgVeda*, still apparently no strict restriction in regard to the slaughter of bulls (as opposed to milch cows) is found. It seems probable that some composers of *Rgvedic* hymns were pre-Aryan (non-Aryan) Indians (who

---

<sup>1</sup> A A Macdonell and A B Keith, *Vedic-Index*, Varanasi, 1958, Vol II, p 147.

<sup>2</sup> *Rig veda* X 85, 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII 43, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, X 89, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, X 79, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, X 16, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, I 164, 27 and 40, IV 16, V 83, 8, VIII 69, 21. X 87, 16 etc.

<sup>8</sup> D R Bhandarkar *Some Aspects of Ancient Indian Culture*, Madras.

<sup>9</sup> A A Macdonell *Vedic Mythology*, Delhi, 1974, p 151.

<sup>10</sup> *Rgveda* VI 28, 1-8, VIII 101. 15-16.

disliked beef-eating) who became Aryanized like the Asuras and the Vratyas and labelled the whole bovine species inviolable, because outside India this inviolability is utterly unknown.<sup>11</sup>

In the days of *Atharva Veda* beef-eating remained unaltered, although it was censured here and there in that *Veda*. During the *Brahmana* period the habit of beef-eating seems to have increased. Among the *Kamya Ishtis* or minor sacrifices set forth in the *Taittiriya Brahmana* different bovine species were sacrificed to different gods, namely, a dwarf ox to Visnu, a drooping horned bull with a blaze on the forehead to Indra, a red cow to Rudra, a white barren cow to Surya and so on. The *Aitareya Brahmana* lists the bull as one of the sacrificial animals.<sup>12</sup> From the *Taittiriya* and the *Pancavimsa Brahmanas* we learn that the sage Agastya slaughtered hundred bulls at a sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> The *Satapatha Brahmana* gives a picture of the inordinate fondness of Yajnavalkya for beef who said:— “I for one eat it, provided it is tender (*amsala*)”.<sup>14</sup> But, strangely enough, we are to face two exhortations in the same *Brahmana* against eating beef.<sup>15</sup>

Among the *Sutras*, *kalpasutra* and *grhyasutra*, display less reticence and distinctly suggest beef as an item of food on different occasions of life. According to *Sankhyayana-sutra* a bull or a sterile cow should be killed in the house of the father of the bride on the wedding day and also in the house of the bridegroom when the husband and the wife arrive after marriage.<sup>16</sup> Even at *sraddhas* or periodical oblations to the manes, the sacrifice of a bull or cow is recommended by the *Apastamba* and *Paraskara grhyasutras*.<sup>17</sup> Yajnavalkya indicates how the aroma of beef was thought to be an ailment for the spirits.<sup>18</sup> According to *Vasistha-sutra* “an ascetic who, invited to dine at a sacrifice . . . rejects meat shall go to hell for as many years as the slaughtered beast has hairs.”<sup>19</sup> The *Khadira* and *Gobhila-Sutras* prescribed the sacrifice of a black cow to the deity of the dwelling-houses when a new house was constructed.<sup>20</sup>

Distinguished guests like one’s teachers, priests, kings, bridegrooms and Vedic students on their return home after the completion of their studies are to be honoured with the presentation of a bull or a barren cow to be slaughtered – hence, a guest is denominated in the Vedic literature as *goghna* or cow-killer.<sup>21</sup> The ceremony of *madhuparka* is notable in this context. The *madhuparka* ceremony seems to have been very old because the custom of entertaining a distinguished guest with beef is found both in the *Satapatha Brahmana*<sup>22</sup> and the *Aitareya Brahmana*<sup>23</sup> and it was in all likelihood known also in the *Rig vedic* period.

---

<sup>11</sup> D R Bhandarkar *op. cit.*, p 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Aitareya Brahmana* VI 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Taittiriya Brahmana* II 7, 11/1; *Pancavimsa Brahmana* XXI/14,5.

<sup>14</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana* III 1, 2, 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, I 2 3, 6-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Sankhyayana- sutra* I 12, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Apastamba* II 7, 16-26; *Paraskara* III 10, 41-49.

<sup>18</sup> *Yajnavalkya* I 258-60.

<sup>19</sup> *Vasistha* XI 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Khadira* IV 2, 17, *Gobhila* IV 7, 27. 54

<sup>21</sup> Asiatic Researches VII p 289; according to Panini (III 4 73): *gam hantitasinai goghno*.

<sup>22</sup> *Satapatha* III 4 1 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Aitareya* I 3 4.

## Dharma-Sutras and Beef-eating

We now turn to the *Smṛti* literature. Manu, like Vasistha, sanctions the consumption of the flesh of all domestic animals which have but one row of teeth.<sup>24</sup> That this would obviously include beef becomes clear from the comments of even such orthodox pundits like Medhatithi and Raghavananda.<sup>25</sup> **Manu also recommends the madhuparka with beef for the reception of kings.**<sup>26</sup> The *Yajñavalkya-smṛti* distinctly lays down that a *mah-oksa* or 'big bull' is to be slaughtered on such occasions.<sup>27</sup> In fact, both the Manu and *Yajñavalkya-Smṛtis* permit the killing of bovine species on such special occasions, in sacrifices and in rites for manes etc.; otherwise beef-eating was regarded as *upapataka* or minor offence, though not *mahapataka* or mortal sin.<sup>28</sup> In spite of the individual predilections of the author of *Manu-Smṛti*, who was a staunch upholder of *ahimsa*, who even said that no flesh can be had without killing living beings and killing such beings cannot lead to heaven and so one should give up flesh eating,<sup>29</sup> the general usage was different in his times and centuries were required before the views propounded by Manu became predominant.<sup>30</sup>

## From Ancient Science and Literature

The ancient medical works like the *Charaka Samhita* recommend beef for pregnant women, but prohibits it for everyday use for everybody.<sup>31</sup> R L Mitra enlightens us that in some medieval Indian medical works beef soup is especially recommended for people recovering from fainting fits.<sup>32</sup>

The Epics allude to the *gomedha* without any details. In the 'Vanaparva' of the *Mahabharata*<sup>33</sup> it is stated that animals killed in sacrifices to the accompaniment of Vedic mantras went to heaven and it narrates the story of king Rantideva in whose sacrifices two thousand animals, including cows, were killed every day. In the 'Udyogaparva' king Nahusha was cursed and hurled down from heaven by the great sage Agastya because he ventured to cast doubts on the Vedic injunctions for the sacrifice of cows and offered insult to a *Brahmana*.<sup>34</sup>

Bhavabhuti in his *Uttara-Rama-Charita* (Act IV) describes how the venerable poet Valmiki, when preparing to receive the sage Vasistha, slaughtered a number of calves for the entertainment of his guest. From the *Mahaviracharita* of the same author it is evident how Vasistha, in his turn, likewise entertained Visvamitra, Janaka, Satananda and other sages with 'fatted calf', and tempted Jamadagnya by saying:— **"The heifer is ready for sacrifice and the food is cooked in ghee."**<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Manu-Smṛti V 18.

<sup>25</sup> D R Bhandarkar *Op. cit.*, p 77.

<sup>26</sup> *Manu-Smṛti* III 119-20.

<sup>27</sup> *Yajñavalaka Smṛti* I 109-10.

<sup>28</sup> Manu V 27-44, XI 60; *Yajñavalkya* I 109-10.

<sup>29</sup> Manu V 48.

<sup>30</sup> P V Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, 1941, Poona, pp 779-80.

<sup>31</sup> R L Mitra, *Indo-Aryans*, Calcuta, 1881, p 360.

<sup>32</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> *Mahabharata* 208, 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> E W Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, New Delhi, 1968, p 19.

<sup>35</sup> R L Mitra *op. cit.*, pp 357-58

In Kautilya's *Arthashastra* cattle are classified, where **bulls are intended for the slaughterhouse**, but the killing of the milch cows, and calves, though permitted for sacrificial purposes, is forbidden for butchers' stalls.<sup>36</sup> Asoka in his Rock Edict I and Pillar Edict I declared how originally thousands of animals were killed in the royal kitchen. Considering the popularity of beef-eating among the people even Asoka, the great propagator of *ahimsa*, resolved later on to discontinue the slaughter of animals only for some days in the year; for example, he included the breeding bull but not the cow in the list of animals not to be slaughtered on those days.<sup>37</sup>

---

[8]

[9] [10]

[18]

[19]

[20] *Khadira* IV 2, 17, *Gobhila* IV 7, 27. 54

[21]

## Beef eating: strangulating history

While one must respect the sentiments of those who worship the cow and regard her as their 'mother', to take offence to the objective study of history just because the facts don't suit their political calculations is yet another sign of a society where liberal space is being strangulated by the practitioners of communal politics. PROF. D. N. JHA, a historian from Delhi University, had been experiencing the nightmares of 'threats to life' from anonymous callers who were trying to prevail upon him not to go ahead with the publication of his well researched work, *Holy Cow: Beef in Indian Dietary Traditions*.

It is a work of serious scholarship based on authentic sources in tune with methods of scientific research in history. The book demonstrates that contrary to the popular belief even today a large number of Indians, the indigenous people in particular and many other communities in general, consume beef unmindful of the dictates of the Hindutva forces.

It is too well known to recount that these *Hindutva* forces confer the status of mother to the cow. Currently 72 communities in Kerala — not all of them untouchables — prefer beef to the expensive mutton and the Hindutva forces are trying to prevail upon them to stop the same.

## Not tenable

To begin with, the historian breaks the myth that Muslim rulers introduced beef eating into India. Much before the advent of Islam in India, beef had been associated with Indian dietary practices. Also it is not at all tenable to hold that dietary habits are a mark of community identity.

A survey of ancient Indian scriptures, especially the Vedas, shows that amongst the nomadic, pastoral Aryans, animal sacrifice was a dominant feature till the emergence of settled agriculture. Cattle were the major property during this phase and they offered them propitiate the gods. Wealth was equated with the ownership of cattle.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Arthashastra* II 26, 29.

<sup>37</sup> *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, VII, p 249; R L Mitra *op. cit.*, p 359.

Many gods such as Indra and Agni are described as having special preferences for different types of flesh — Indra had weakness for bull's meat and Agni for bull's and cow's. It is recorded that the Maruts and the Asvins were also offered cows. In the Vedas there is a mention of around 250 animals out of which at least 50 were supposed to be fit for sacrifice and consumption. In the Mahabharata there is a mention of a king named Rantideva who achieved great fame by distributing food grains and beef to Brahmins. Taittiriya Brahman categorically tells us:— `Verily the cow is food' (*atho annam via gauh*) and Yajnavalkya's insistence on eating the tender (*amsala*) flesh of the cow is well known. Even later Brahminical texts provide the evidence for eating beef. Even Manu-smriti did not prohibit the consumption of beef.

## As a medicine

In therapeutic section of Charak Samhita (pages 86-87) the flesh of cow is prescribed as a medicine for various diseases. It is also prescribed for making soup. It is emphatically advised as a cure for irregular fever, consumption, and emaciation. The fat of the cow is recommended for debility and rheumatism.

With the rise of agricultural economy and the massive transformation occurring in society, changes were to be brought in in the practice of animal sacrifice also. At that time there were ritualistic practices like animal sacrifices, with which Brahmins were identified. Buddha attacked these practices. There were sacrifices, which involved 500 oxen, 500 male calves, 500 female calves and 500 sheep to be tied to the sacrificial pole for slaughter. Buddha pointed out that aswa-medha, purusa-medha, vajapeya sacrifices did not produce good results. According to a story in Digha Nikaya, when Buddha was touring Magadha, a Brahmin called Kutadanta was preparing for a sacrifice with 700 bulls, 700 goats and 700 rams. Buddha intervened and stopped him. His rejection of animal sacrifice and emphasis on non-injury to animals assumed a new significance in the context of new agriculture.

## The threat from Buddhism

The emphasis on non-violence by Buddha was not blind or rigid. He did taste beef and it is well known that he died due to eating pork. Emperor Ashok after converting to Buddhism did not turn to vegetarianism. He only restricted the number of animals to be killed for the royal kitchen.

So where do matters change and how did the cow become a symbol of faith and reverence to the extent of assuming the status of `motherhood'? Over a period of time mainly after the emergence of Buddhism or rather as an accompaniment of the Brahminical attack on Buddhism, the practices started being looked on with different emphasis. The threat posed by Buddhism to the Brahminical value system was too severe. In response to low castes slipping away from the grip of Brahminism, the battle was taken up at all the levels. At philosophical level Sankara reasserted the supremacy of Brahminical values, at political level King Pushyamitra Shung ensured the physical attack on Buddhist monks, at the level of symbols King Shashank got the Bodhi tree (where Gautama the Buddha got Enlightenment) destroyed.

One of the appeals to the spread of Buddhism was the protection of cattle wealth, which was needed for the agricultural economy. In a way while Brahminism `succeeded' in banishing Buddhism from India, it had also to transform itself from the `animal sacrifice' state to the one which could be in tune with the times. It is here that this ideology took up the cow as a symbol of their ideological march. But unlike Buddha whose pronouncements were based on reason,

the counteraction of Brahminical ideology took the form of a blind faith based on assertion. So while Buddha's non-violence was for the preservation of animal wealth for the social and compassionate reasons the counter was based purely on symbolism. So while the followers of Brahminical ideology accuse Buddha of 'weakening' India due to his doctrine of non-violence, he was not a cow worshipper or vegetarian in the current Brahminical sense.

Despite the gradual rigidification of Brahminical 'cow as mother' stance, large sections of low castes continued the practice of beef eating. The followers of Buddhism continued to eat flesh including beef. Since Brahminism is the dominant religious tradition, Babur, the first Mughal emperor, in his will to his son Humayun, in deference to these notions, advised him to respect the cow and avoid cow slaughter. With the construction of Hindutva ideology and politics, in response to the rising Indian national movement, the demand for ban on cow slaughter also came up. In post-Independence India RSS repeatedly raised this issue to build up a mass campaign but without any response to its call till the 1980s.

While one must respect the sentiments of those who worship cow and regard her as their mother, to take offence to the objective study of history just because the facts don't suit their political calculations is yet another sign of a society where liberal space is being strangled by the practitioners of communal politics. We have seen enough such threats and offences in recent past - be it the opposition to films or the destruction of paintings, or the dictates of the communalists to the young not to celebrate Valentine's Day, etc., - and hope the democratic spirit of our Constitution holds the forte and any threat to the democratic freedom is opposed tooth and nail.

Prof. RAM PUNIYANI

A member of EKTA (Committee for Communal Amity), Mumbai

## A Brahmin's Cow Tales

Beef—it's the oldest shibboleth in the Indian mind. It is with textual evidence from Hindu, Buddhist and Jain canons that historian D.N. Jha takes on the sacred cow.

SHEELA REDDY ON D.N. JHA

For over a month, the mild, balding professor of history, Dwijendra Narayan Jha, has been shuffling to his classroom in Delhi University escorted by a police constable. Teaching ancient history does not usually endanger one's health, but ever since Jha went public with the best-kept secret in Indian history—the beef-eating habits of ancient Hindus, Buddhists and even early Jains in a book titled Holy Cow—Beef in Indian Dietary Conditions—his phone hasn't stopped ringing. "The calls are usually abusive," says Jha, "but sometimes they demand to know what evidence I have, and one day late in July it was an anonymous caller threatening dire consequences if I ever brought out my book." The calls had two effects on the 61-year-old historian: he called the police and braced himself for battle. "There is a cultural war going on and academics have a role to play," Jha says calmly. But it's not the kind of war that he had anticipated. Even before his book could hit the stands, the VHP exhorted its cadre to confiscate and burn copies. The BJP followed suit: one of its MPs, R.S. Rawat, wrote to the Union home minister demanding not only a ban on the book but also the arrest and prosecution of its author and CB Publishers. But before the book could be burnt or banned, the Jain Seva Sangh stepped in. Outraged by Jha's reported assertion that their founder Mahavira ate meat, the Hyderabad-based organisation sought a court injunction against the

book, leaving the nonplussed historian without the words to fight his war. Anticipating controversy and debate, Jha meticulously scoured ancient texts, culling material from original sources for over two years. "If they want to ban my book, then they will have to ban the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Sutras and the epics. Where will they stop? I have given evidence, if they have counter-evidence, why don't they come forward with it? But they are so illiterate, they haven't even heard of those texts, let alone read them. I have texts and they go by blind faith," he says. "That is what a historian can and should do: counter faith with facts," he adds. Jha's interest in dietary history



began a few years ago after reading French historian Fernand Braudel's history of early modern European diet. But he soon became intrigued by the beef-eating habits of Indians which existed in Rig Vedic times and continued till the 19th century and after, despite repeated Brahminical injunctions against cow-killing. That ancient Hindus, including Brahmins, were beef-eaters, willing to incur the minor penalty that an agrarian society began imposing on cow-killers, and that this fondness for beef had nothing to do with Islam or Christianity came neither as a shock nor surprise to this unconventional Brahmin, whose first name Dwijendra means "the holiest of Brahmins". "No serious historian, not even 'Hindu' ones like R.C. Majumdar or K.M. Munshi, has ever disputed that ancient Hindus ate beef," says Jha. However, convinced that repeated Brahminical injunctions not to kill cows reflected a popular proclivity for beef, Jha went further and unearthed irrefutable evidence of cow slaughter and consumption by Hindus of all classes, including Brahmins, until as late as the 19th century. "I was expecting this," says Jha, who tasted beef for the first time nearly 30 years ago at Cambridge. "It was difficult to believe Brahmins were laying down norms without a reason. I think there is much more evidence than I got." The cow as a sacred animal, Jha believes, did not really gain currency until Dayanand Saraswati's cow protection movement in the 19th century". The cow became a tool of mass political mobilisation with the organised cow-protection movement," the historian points out. "The killing of cows stopped gradually with the agrarian society and caste rigidity. The Brahmins found it convenient to say that those who ate beef were untouchable. But they themselves continued to consume it, recommending it for occasions such as *shraadh*. Simultaneously, they trivialised the beef taboo by saying that eating beef is like cleaning your teeth with your fingers. It was never a sin to eat it, merely an indecorum. There was never a taboo, only discouragement." With this discovery, culled from ancient scriptures, medical texts, the Manusmriti and religious commentaries, Jha impishly "decided to take the bull by its horns" and publish a book on his findings. "There is a saying in Hindi: *Laaton ke bhoot, baaton se nahin maante* (Those used to force are not persuaded by words). So I had to give them the shock treatment," he explains. Only, Jha's "shock treatment" did not stop with Hindus. Buddhists, he claims, citing canonical texts like Mahaparinibbana Sutta and Anguttara Nikaya, also ate beef and other meat. "In fact, the Buddha died after eating a meal of pork," he says. "Vegetarianism was not a viable option for Buddhist monks in a society that loved meat of all kinds—pig, rhinoceros, cow, buffalo, fish, snake, birds, including crows and peacocks. Only camel and dog meat was taboo in India." Similarly with the early Jains. Citing the Bhagavati-sutra, Jha points out that Mahavira once ate a chicken meal to gain strength for a yogic battle with an adversary. "His only condition was to ask the woman who cooked the meal to find a chicken already killed by a cat instead of slaughtering a fresh one," says Jha. "This has upset the Jains, but why are they not upset with

the texts that carry these stories? I found these in book stores run by devout Jain booksellers like Motilal Banarsidass and Sohanlal Jain Dharam Pracharak Samiti." Despite Jha's avowed dislike of "being conspicuous", the man whose family consists of "a wife and three servants" has never shied away from controversy. His family is accustomed to his "mad ways" and his upbringing has been unorthodox enough to allow him to experiment even with beef. But his community of orthodox Maithili Brahmins in Bihar has not taken kindly to his book either. "They didn't like me citing sources from Mithila to prove my point," says Jha nonchalantly. "Indian society has come to such a juncture," says Jha, "that historians have to play an active role in countering superstitions and unreason." He took up cudgels during the Ayodhya dispute and even objected to the TV serialisation of epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. "It politicised the myths and propagated a value system and religiosity not in keeping with a state-run broadcaster," he says. "Ramanand Sagar's version of the epics is not real history." "Old and tired out" Jha may call himself, but there's something irrepressible about him. Bans and fatwas haven't stopped him from beginning work on his next book. "It will be called," says Jha with deadpan face,

"Adulterous Gods and their Inebriated Women".