

Beef Bans, Beef Parties, and Sacred Cows

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The uproar about the beef bans in India has gone through several rounds during the last months. Starting from the new Maharashtra legislation that bans all slaughter of cattle to the lynching of a Muslim in Dadri because his family allegedly had beef, two basic positions have crystallized.

On the side of the advocates of the bans, the basic claims go as follows: most Hindus do not eat beef, since they consider the cow as sacred. Because of this, they also feel that the animal should be protected through legal bans on cow slaughter and the consumption of beef. To respect the religious sentiments of the Hindus (and Jains), other communities should accept these laws. Just take one particularly blunt expression of this position, that by the BJP Chief Minister of Haryana, Manohar Lal Khattar. He says that “Muslims can continue to live in this country, but they will have to give up eating beef” because “the cow is an article of faith here.” Even though he does not tell us how on earth it is possible for an object to become an article of faith (after all, only thoughts or beliefs could be articles of faith), he adds that “freedom of one person is only to the extent that is not hurting another person.” And: “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.”¹ Even though the Indian constitution appears dumb when put this way, we know that it is not as stupid as our Chief Minister makes it appear.

On the other side, opponents of the beef bans say these do not simply constitute a restriction on personal freedoms, but also an imposition of the Hindu religion onto all Indian citizens, which violates the principles of religious freedom and secularism. Moreover, the bans inevitably target specific groups: it is mainly Muslims, Christians, and low-caste Hindus who consume beef in India; it was also a Muslim who was killed in Dadri because he had allegedly kept beef in his house. Thus, the opponents of the bans see them as an indication of the growing religious intolerance in a country ruled by a Hindu nationalist party. To protest against this intolerance, they want to organize beef-eating festivals and other protest actions.

Rather than repeating the same old arguments, we would instead like to examine what the advocates and the opponents of the beef bans hold in common: both believe that the reasons for banning beef have something to do with religion and with Hinduism in particular. This agreement is what allows one party to see the legislation as a manifestation of religious intolerance and a violation

¹ “Muslims can live in this country, but will have to give up eating beef, says Haryana CM...,” *The Indian Express*, 16 October 2015. See URL: < <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/muslims-can-live-in-this-country-but-they-will-have-to-give-up-eating-beef-says-haryana-cm-manohar-lal-khattar/> >

of secularism and the other party to present the consumption of beef and slaughter of cattle as hurting the religious sentiments of a community.

1. *Why Not Beef?*

The last centuries have brought forth several explanations to account for the fact that many Indians refrain from eating meat in general and beef in particular. The most popular one suggests that Hindus consider the cow to be sacred or holy. They allegedly see the cow as a (divine) mother and thus abhor even the thought of slaughtering and eating her. More generally, it is said, Indian vegetarianism is inspired by the doctrine of *ahimsa* or non-violence, which forbids all violence towards living beings.

How credible is this story? Every single day in India, we encounter a huge number of facts that offer counter-evidence to these claims. When cows come to eat the plants in their garden or the vegetables in the market, Indians (including Hindus) throw stones at them or beat them with sticks. The same people allow bovines in the street to eat plastic bags that cause lasting damage to the internal organs of these animals. As is the case elsewhere, farmers in India whip their bullocks to make them work on the field. Is this an expression of non-violence towards the cow or the ox? Would you do all these things to someone or something you consider sacred and holy? Would you throw stones at your divine mother, whip her husband, and then give her some nice plastic bags to eat instead of food?

If Hindus truly see the cow as a sacred and divine being, they must be cretins not to realize that the sacred and the divine require unusual and special treatments. Or they are hypocrites who one day worship something and the next day trash the same thing, accordingly as it suits or benefits them. Now, it is impossible that the millions of Indians who refrained from eating beef over the centuries were all idiots or hypocrites. What then could explain their behaviour? This question often takes the following form: Given the scarcity of food and proteins and a surplus of cattle, how could so many Indians refuse to eat the protein-rich beef?

Fortunately, we have anthropologists to save us from irrationality by inventing a 'rational' explanation for the behaviour of the Indian masses. Indeed, in 1966, Columbia University Professor Marvin Harris published an article in the prominent journal *Current Anthropology* on "The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle." Though an ethnographer, he admitted he had "never seen a sacred cow, nor been to India." Still, he valiantly developed an argument "based upon intensive reading." This argument suggests that one should not look to "Hindu theology" to account for taboos and rituals related to the management of Indian cattle, but to positive-functioned adaptive processes of the ecological system of which they are part. What does this mean? Well, "the cattle complex" in India is to be explained by looking at the symbiotic (rather than competitive) relationship between the human and bovine population. Simply put: in India, cattle has contributed to milk production, the production of grain crops, the many uses of dung, and other things of utility to human beings. Since cattle is needed to carry out such essential agricultural tasks, this 'may have been' the reason why Indians developed a religious taboo against eating beef. Harris sees more potential functions: perhaps it could be the case that the orthodox Hindu beef-eating taboo provides marginal and depressed castes with "an occasional, but nutritionally critical, source of animal protein." Conclusion? "The probability that

India's cattle complex is a positive-functioned part of a naturally selected *eco-system* is at least as good as that it is a negative-functioned expression of an irrational ideology."²

With all its 'perhaps', 'maybes', 'quite possibilities' and 'probabilities', what does this anthropologist's 'explanation' really say? That there is about a fifty-fifty chance between two possibilities:

- (1) either you or I or any other Indian prefer not to eat beef, because we have a symbiotic relationship with cows, and this was once upon a time part of a naturally selected eco-system in India, which we are not aware of;
- (2) or we are doing so because we believe in an irrational ideology of the sacred cow, animal worship, non-violence, and the like.

Unfortunately, even the first option cannot save us from idiocy. With "altered techno-environmental conditions," Harris suggests, new more efficient food energy systems may be evolved, which supersede the old eco-system. In other words, for a time, it may have made sense not to slaughter cattle and eat beef in the Indian agricultural eco-system, but given new conditions – say, the introduction of tractors, different types of fuel, and all kinds of technologies, or, even more importantly, the rapid urbanization in India – this no longer makes sense. Given the radically changed circumstances, then, Hindus who continue to abide by "the orthodox Hindu beef-eating taboo" must be irrational today. Such contorted 'explanations' do not at all make sense of the practices of generations of Indians, but instead transform these people into hypocrites and cretins.

There is a much simpler story that can make sense of the practices that we are discussing here. We will tell you that story. Let us start with an event that took place in 1972: an airplane carrying a rugby team from Uruguay crashed in one of the most remote and coldest parts of the Andes mountains. After nine days, the remaining survivors heard on the radio that the rescue search had been called off. By then, they had finished all the food they could lay their hands on. Without any hope of rescue and after great debate, these starving people decided to start eating the flesh of their dead companions. Eventually, a number of the surviving passengers could be rescued. This event brought in its wake an international debate about the question as to when it is morally justified to consume human flesh. One of the conclusions was that this is allowed in times of extreme distress, and only in case that is the only alternative to death by starvation.

A decade later, between 1983 and 1985, one of the worst famines in the history of Ethiopia hit this East-African country. It led to more than 500,000 deaths. Across different provinces, people were dying every day; their corpses often lying about. Yet, in this country, there were no reports of starving people feeding on the flesh of their dead fellow human beings. Even in the face of certain death, the Ethiopians did not begin to eat human flesh in order to survive. Why is that? Instead of complicated pseudo-explanations about 'religious taboos' and 'naturally selected eco-systems', one simple answer is staring us in the face: much like the rest of us, the Ethiopians *did not see human beings as food*. Because human beings did not count as food to them, it did not cross their mind to begin eating the flesh of the dead. This is what most of us are like: when we say to a child that we love a great deal "I am going to eat you up," we do not mean that we want to consume the child's flesh. Since we do

² Marvin Harris, "The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle," in *Current Anthropology*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1966), pp. 51-54.

not consider our fellow human beings as food, we would consider it absurd (or pathological) to take this expression literally.

In the case of the many Indians who refrain from eating beef, the issue is as simple: *these people simply do not see cows as food*. The same goes for those who belong to groups that traditionally do not eat meat: from when they are children, they do not consider any kind of animal as potential food and that accounts for their vegetarianism. This is not because they consider the cow, the goat, or the chicken as sacred; it is not because they worship animals or see them as their divine mother; it is not because they believe in the doctrine of nonviolence; it is simply because they do not see these beings as food. Of course, over time, they can learn to consider these animals as food and even eat their meat. But that does not happen because they have lost their belief in some ‘orthodox Hindu taboo’ or in ‘the doctrine of ahimsa’ or because the cow has suddenly lost its sacred and divine status to them.

If the explanation is that simple, why then – you may ask – do so many people think that Hindus refrain from eating beef because of their religious beliefs? Why do both the advocates and the opponents of beef bans in India agree on this point? How come the former are so convinced that these laws are a matter of respecting the religious sentiments of one community, while the latter seem to know for certain that these laws are manifestations of religious intolerance that impose one religion onto all other communities?

2. *The Discovery of the Holy Cow*

When Indian politicians pass laws banning the slaughter of cattle and consumption of beef, they often preach about the age-old importance of the cow to Indian culture. It is apparently “an article of faith” to us, as the Haryana Chief Minister puts it. These politicians seem to think that saving Indian culture is all about protecting the cow. But does Indian culture really revolve around cows and preventing people from eating beef?

Except in the eyes of the people just mentioned, this does not appear to be the case. In fact, it is alien to our traditions to tell people from other groups what they are allowed and not allowed to eat. The Indian traditions generally do not compel others as to what to believe, which rituals to do, whom to revere, or which tradition to follow. All of this is your own choice and we show a healthy indifference towards each other’s practices. The attitude towards food and eating is very similar: what you eat is your affair and not mine. In Kannada, we even have an expression for that. It says that what one eats is one’s own wish, while how one is seen is the other’s wish. Even Mahatma Gandhi, who did view cow protection as essential to Hinduism, made it very clear that the prohibition to slaughter cows should not be legally imposed on all Indians: “I have been long pledged to serve the cow but how can my religion also be the religion of the rest of the Indians? It will mean coercion against those Indians who are not Hindus. ... How can I force anyone not to slaughter cows unless he is himself so disposed?” Gandhi next pointed out that many Hindus in the India of his time indirectly participated in cow-slaughter, made bullocks carry huge burdens which almost crush the animals, and even ate beef soup.³

³ “What Mahatma Gandhi Said to Those Who Wanted Beef Banned in India, *The Wire*, 02/10/2015, see the URL: <http://thewire.in/2015/10/02/what-mahatma-gandhi-said-to-those-who-wanted-beef-banned-in-india-12170/>”

As many have pointed out, it is not some ancient ‘article of faith’ of Hinduism to regard the cow as holy and to ban its slaughter. There is evidence of sacrifice of cattle in the Vedas, texts often characterized as ‘Hindu scriptures’. There is evidence also that beef was eaten by followers of the Hindu traditions.⁴ Of course, we also find textual passages that give some kind of special status to the cow and there certainly are rituals in some Indian traditions where the cow plays a central role. But the issue is this: there is neither empirical nor textual evidence for the claim that Hinduism considers the cow as ‘sacred’ and that the Hindus ‘worship’ the cow. Yet, today, many Indians speak like this; some even say that the protection of the cow belongs to the essence of Hinduism. Critics agree that the Hindu religion includes belief in the sacred cow, but argue that this belief should not be imposed onto others. Where has this story then come from?

Like so many of the stories we tell about ourselves these days, this story came from Western culture and its way of making sense of Indian culture and society. The idea that Indians worship the cow goes back to the sixteenth century and it became popular during the nineteenth century in Europe. First listen to Duarte Barbosa’s travel report about India, written in the early sixteenth century. He lists a series of groups, each of which had their own separate idolatry, according to him. When discussing another sort of ‘heathen’ called “the Baneanes,” he writes the following:

“This people eats neither flesh nor fish, nor anything subject to death; they slay nothing, nor are they willing to see the slaughter of any animal; *and thus they maintain their idolatry and hold it so firmly that it is a terrible thing.*”⁵

In other words, the fact that some group of people refused to eat animals or kill them became an expression of idolatry. More than a century later, in the last decades of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese Padre Joseph Vaz of the religious order of the Oratorians travelled from Goa to Canara and later to Sri Lanka to work as a missionary. Another Padre wrote a biographical memoir where he recounts all the plots of the Padre’s enemies to try and destroy him. One day, “the devil suggested a false accusation against him and the newly converted Christians before the tribunal of the King of Candy.” What was the accusation?

“They were arraigned for high treason against his divine Majesty. They accused the Padre of having baptized the young man and his companions with cow’s blood mixed with water, to do which they must necessarily have wounded or killed a cow. It must be understood that the Pagans in India worship the cow as a deity; and that to kill one is considered as one of the three heinous sins which cannot, by any means whatsoever, be expiated.”⁶

⁴ D.N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2009).

⁵ Manswel Longworth Dames (ed.), *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants written by Duarte Barbosa, and Completed about the Year 1518 A.D., vol. 1* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1812), p. 111.

⁶ Padre Sebastiano Dorego, “Biographical Memoir of Padre Joseph Vaz,” in *The Asiatic Journal*, vol. 12-13 (1821-1822), p. 347.

It was not just the Portuguese Catholics who attributed the idolatry of animals or the worship of the cow as a deity to the Indian heathens or pagans; the British joined the fray. Consider a passage from the mid-eighteenth century: in 1761, Richard Owen Cambridge wrote an account of the war that had taken place between the English and the French on the Coromandel Coast in the preceding decade. At some point, he reports about an expedition against Angria by Commodore James and discusses the difficulty of getting provisions:

“Of all provisions, beef is the most difficult to be procured from any part of the continent; for, excepting Rajapore, which joins to Bancote, and is possessed by Mahometans (being the port of the Seedee) the coast is all inhabited by Gentoos, who never kill any living creature; and as they worship the cow, are particular forbid by their religion to suffer the death of any kind of cattle.”⁷

Similarly, in a report of *A Voyage to the East Indies*, published in 1772, John Henry Grose repeats that it is difficult to procure beef in most parts of the coast, “as they are under the jurisdiction of princes of the strictest casts of the Gento religion, who worship the cow, and regard the killing of that animal as the greatest of crimes.”⁸ Robert Orme, in his *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan* (published between 1763-78), reports about the attitude of a number of groups in India towards animals and food:

All these casts acknowledge the Brahmins for their priests, and with them admit the transmigration. In devotion to this opinion some afflict themselves at the death of a fly, although occasioned by their inadvertence. But the far greater numbers of casts are not so scrupulous, and eat, although very sparingly, both of fish and flesh; but, like the Jews, not of all kinds indifferently. ... They esteem milk the purest of foods, because they think it partakes of some of the properties of the nectar of their gods, and because they esteem the cow itself almost a divinity.

These food habits, the abhorrence of bloodshed, and the climate of India “have altogether contributed to render the Indian the most enervated inhabitant of the globe,” he adds. Later, his text also repeats the passage about the Coromandel coast and speaks of “the strictest casts of the Indian religion, who worship the cow, and regard the killing of that animal as the greatest of crimes.”⁹

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, this story about the Hindus as cow-worshippers appeared to have become popular back home in England. Thus, in 1822, one Rebecca Edridge wrote a series of thoughts and anecdotes under the title *The Scrinium*, the Latin word for a case or chest for books and papers. She shares an interesting anecdote with the reader. An English

⁷ Richard Owen Cambridge, *An Account of the War in India Between the English and French, On the Coast of Coromandel, from 1750 to the Year 1760* (London: T. Jefferys, 1761), p. 94.

⁸ John Henry Grose, *A Voyage to the East Indies* (London: S. Hooper, 1772), p. 220.

⁹ Robert Orme, *A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan, from the Year MDCCVLV* (London: J. Nourse, 1763-78), p. 5, p. 406.

gentleman had returned home from the East to Cheltenham and brought with him a Hindu servant. Edridge first gives some background about the Hindus:

“The Hindoos are among those who never eat animal food. They abstain, as many casts do in India, from motives of religion, for they not only forbear to kill, but in some instance they worship animals. The Hindoos worship the cow. The idea of worshipping an animal whose powers are so limited that far from being able to afford succour to us, it cannot at all times assist itself, is, to those who have been taught to worship and adore the omniscient and omnipotent maker and ruler of the universe, repugnant; and in a country where abstinence from any kind of food, is never practiced as a religious duty, such abstinence appears absurd.”

Next, she continues to tell the anecdote. Always ready to make fun of a person from the uncivilized parts of the world, the servants at Cheltenham decided to go for a practical joke. They prepared dinner for the Hindu and chopped and mixed with his vegetables a small quantity of veal: “The poor fellow ate his dinner, and to their surprize and disappointment, did not discover the mixture they had made.” Since the joke had missed its effect, the servants then told the Hindu what he had eaten. When he reacted with great consternation, Edridge was in a privileged position to understand the reaction of this ‘simple Hindu’ and contrast it to the English idea of sacrilege:

“To have tasted animal food was, in the opinion of the simple Hindoo, a great sin; and to have eaten a part of that animal which was the object of adoration, was to him a sin so heinous that the wretched man was almost frantic. The idea we have of sacrilege does not express the feelings of the terrified Hindoo. He was incapable of all exertion; he gave himself up to penitence and penance. He left the house, and tarried in the fields, as though he were become unworthy to associate with man. There, by ablutions, prayers, and prostrations, he endeavoured to atone for the sin he had committed, and though after the term of his long expiation, he returned to his master’s service, he never again enjoyed the serenity, which til then had been the happiness of his life.”¹⁰

Regardless of how veridical this anecdote is and how distasteful the joke, Edridge’s report gives us the elements to make sense of the European discourse about the practice of cow worship which it attributed to India. It is obvious to her that the Hindus worship the cow (and some other animals) and that it is from motives of religion that they abstain from killing cows and eating beef. She explains why this is so repugnant to the Christians of her country. They worship and adore the omniscient and omnipotent maker and ruler of the universe, namely, the God of the Bible. In contrast, Hindus worship a weak animal that cannot even fend for itself. Hence, the Hindus have all kinds of irrational beliefs about the great sin of tasting animal food and even more irrational practices of penance and ablution.

Without knowing some basics of Christianity, one cannot understand this account of Hindu cow worship. According to this religion, the biblical God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – indeed is the omniscient and omnipotent maker and ruler of the universe. His Will is the Law of the universe; what He wants happens and, in His Son Jesus Christ, He has also revealed His Will and His

¹⁰ Rebecca Edridge, Rebecca, *The Scrinium, in Two Volumes, vol. II* (London, 1822), pp. 339-341.

Plan to humanity. The Biblical God created humanity as his sentient creatures so that they may worship Him, that is, always obey His Will and are part of His plan. Thus, they recognize that He is the omnipotent creator and ruler of the universe of which human beings are a part.

But Christianity also says that there is the devil or Satan, the fallen angel who is the lord of this world, namely the planet earth. The devil is always out to seduce human beings into worshipping him, the false god, instead of the true God. Humanity has an inherent urge to worship and obey God, Christianity claims, but the devil misleads us by drawing upon this urge and diverting it. We are prone to this, because we have become sinful since Adam's eating of the Forbidden Fruit and the subsequent Fall from Eden. We are sinful beings. Hence, under the devil's grip, we begin to invent false gods, false doctrines, and corrupt rites and thus create false religion. In the realm of practice, the result is idolatry or idol worship. This is not at all '*murti puja*'; it is the worship of the devil and his false gods in the form of idols. It is false and evil, but also stupid, since humanity now worships its creation instead of the Creator of everything. It worships false gods instead of the one true God, thinking that these false gods control the universe and can save them from sin. Those who worship the devil are 'the heathens' or 'the pagans'; they are the ones who have lost the worship of the one true God of the Bible (unlike the Christians, Jews, and Muslims).

This is the basic notion of idol worship in Christianity. Very early on in Christian history, the church fathers and other theologians began to point out the many forms and ramifications of idolatry or devil worship. Pointing to the ancient Egyptians, they said that one such form was the worship of animals or what was called 'zoolatry'. When early European travellers and missionaries came to India from the fifteenth century, this was the religious framework within which they perceived the culture and society of the Indians. Either the local population would worship the biblical God or it would be engaged in idolatry. The travellers soon concluded that the Indians were heathens and idolaters, who worshipped the devil through false gods and idols. They explained almost every unfamiliar practice in these terms of false religion and idolatry. Did the Indian heathens perform a variety of rituals at home, in the temple, and elsewhere? This proved that idolatry had permeated their lives. Did the heathens have a variety of stories about the deeds of *devas* and *devis*? This showed how immoral the false gods were, which they worshipped. Did the heathens also perform rituals for all kinds of objects? This showed how idolatry could degenerate into the worship of 'sticks and stones', as the Bible said. Did the heathens refrain from killing animals and eating meat? Ah, like the Egyptians, they must be zoolaters who believe that animals are divine and should therefore be worshipped. Did some heathens also refrain from killing cows and consuming beef and had rituals that seemed to involve the cow? Oh, the devil must have taught them to see the cow as sacred, as holy, as a divinity to be worshipped.

From Duarte Barbosa to Rebecca Edridge, we are witness to the crystallization of this account as to how the Indian heathens, later called 'Gentoos' and even later 'Hindoos', worship the animal that the cow is. They see in this a particularly ridiculous example of worship of false gods. True religion – that is, God's own revelation of His Will in the Bible – told us that only the one true Maker and Ruler of the universe ought to be worshipped. He is omniscient and omnipotent; upon Him depends our salvation; He is our only hope, as we are sinners. And here we have a bunch of people who think they should direct this worship at the cow, a helpless and dumb animal, if ever there was one. They must be the dumbest kind of idolaters, these Hindus. So the reasoning of these European Christians went.

Take one of the reports that would have great impact on the British understanding of Indian religion: the Serampore missionary William Ward's *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the*

Hindoos published in 1822. In the third volume of this work, Ward discusses the many objects of worship of the Hindus, from God through the many deities to animals. The first chapter is titled “Of God” and Ward begins as follows: “It is a painful reflection to every benevolent mind, that not a single Hindoo temple, dedicated to the One God, is to be found in all Hindoost’han; nor is any act of worship, in any form, addressed by this people to God.” The Hindus commonly talk about the unity of God as “One Brahma, without a second.”

“Yet they have no idea of any other being engaged in the work, either of creation or providence, except the gods. In the whole of the reigning superstition, the gods alone are seen; and these gods bear no more resemblance to the one true God, than darkness to light, than vice to virtue.”

In a section on “the worship of beasts,” William Ward has a long discussion on the cow and its worship in the Hindu religion. In this period, the British spoke of Brahma as the Hindu name for the creator God, whom the heathens had so thoroughly misunderstood. Ward writes: “Bruhma created the brahmuns and the cow at the same time: the brahmuns to read the formulas, and the cow to afford milk (clarified butter) for the burnt-offerings. The cow is called the mother of the gods, and is declared by Bruhma to be a proper object of worship.” Ward then explained which form the worship of the cow took and how its worship accounted for the abhorrence towards eating the flesh of cows:

“The ceremonies are the same as those before the images of the gods: the prayers are necessarily peculiar to the object worshipped. ... A few persons strict in their religion worship the cow daily: after bathing, they throw flowers at her feet, and feed her with fresh grass, saying, “O Bhuguvutee! eat;” and then walk round her three or seven times, making obeisance. ... If you speak among Hindoos of eating the flesh of cows, they immediately raise their hands to their ears: yet milkmen, carmen, and farmers, beat the cow as unmercifully as a carrier of coals beats his ass in England; and many starve them to death in the cold weather, rather than be at the expense of giving them food. Thus is the cow at once a beast of burden and a goddess.”

Instead of realizing that this treatment of cows showed that Hindus do not consider the cow as a sacred object of worship at all, to Ward’s eyes this merely showed how corrupt and hypocritical the heathens of India were.¹¹

From this period onwards, it became a commonly acknowledged ‘fact’ to the Western world that the Hindus worship cows. Citing the reports of missionaries, travellers, and officials, all kinds of literature confirmed that idolatry had taken this peculiar form in India. What was a deeply theological claim of Christianity – namely that the devil worship of the Indian heathens also directed itself at animals such as the cow – was now presented as a neutral and self-evident ‘fact’ about the Hindu religion. This ‘fact’ explained the widespread vegetarianism in India: Hindus and Jains believed that animals like the cow are sacred and that no violence should be inflicted upon them.

¹¹ William Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos: Including a Minute Description of Their Manners and Customs, and Translations from Their Principal Works, in Three Volumes, Vol. III* (London: Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen, 1822), pp. 195-7.

One textbook about India said: “The ox and the cow are treated with as much religious veneration in India, as they were in ancient Egypt.” It then went on to cite the ‘information’ provided by William Ward and made the ‘scientific’ statement that the *bos Indicus* (the Indian bovine or Zebu) is “the sainted species.”¹² In an American annual journal of 1849, a doctor reported the following about the eating habits of the Indian population: “The Mahometans, like the Jews, practice circumcision, and abhor pork. The Hindoos, as they worship the cow, abjure the eating of beef. The Anglo-Indians, as they partake of both, can make little progress in converting either.”¹³ Here, we see how another development comes to the surface: these eating habits differentiate different religious communities from each other. The identity of the Hindus as opposed to the Muslims and the Anglo-Indians is that they worship the cow and abjure the eating of beef. Discussing the tribes of the West of India, an overview of the “Physical History of Mankind” of the same period said that “the Kattees ... are Hindoos and worship the cow and adore Mahadeo and other Hindu divinities.”¹⁴

Thus we could go on and on citing source after source to show how it took only a few decades to transform a Christian-theological claim about the devil worshippers of India into an anthropological trivium about the Hindus and their religion: they considered the cow a sacred divinity, hence worshipped the animal, and refused to kill her, let alone eat her meat. By the twentieth century, this had become almost unquestionable: where India was discussed in Western literature, the two most popular trivia about the country became ‘the caste system’ and ‘the sacred cow’. From textbooks to cartoons, cow worship was presented as perhaps the most ridiculous practice of a people pervaded by superstitious beliefs and mindless rites. It became the essence of a culture that had allegedly never moved away from the most irrational forms of religion. That many of us still see things this way should not divert our attention away from the truth: in reality, this is not an anthropological fact at all; it is a claim from Christian theology and its understanding of idolatry as the worship of the devil that can take so many different forms.

3. *Idolizing Beef*

It is time for us to realize a most peculiar fact. On both sides, participants in the contemporary debate about the beef bans have accepted an age-old Christian-theological story about the cow worship of the Indian heathens as though it is a truth about their own culture. Implicitly, then, they agree to a characterization of Hindu traditions as idolatry, as though this indeed describes a typical characteristic of the religion called ‘Hinduism’. Let us end by briefly pointing out how both parties are doing so and how a Christian story about false religion, which no Indian understands, has now come to determine legal measures and political debates in India.

Let us first turn back to the advocates of the laws banning the slaughter of cattle and the consumption of beef. Remember the words of the BJP Chief Minister of Haryana. To justify these bans,

¹² Josiah Conder, *India: Geographical, Historical, and Topographical, in Four Volumes, vol. I* (London: James Duncan and Thomas Tegg and Son, 1826), pp. 72-3.

¹³ Anonymous, “Fragments From the Portfolio of a Doctor.” In *The Family Circle & Parlor Annual*, 1849, edited and published by Mrs. D. Newell (New York, 1849).

¹⁴ James Cowles Prichard, *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind, vol. 4* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert & Piper, 1844), p. 243.

he argues that “the cow is an article of faith” in India. What could this possibly mean? An article of faith is a proposition that is part of a creed or another statement of doctrine. For instance: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth” is an article of faith part of the Apostles’ Creed in Christianity. How could the cow be an article of faith? It cannot. If we give a charitable interpretation, we could suggest that the CM means something like this: “I believe in the cow” or “We believe in the cow as a sacred animal and divine mother” are articles of faith. Of which religion? Hinduism, one supposes. Yet, as scholars concluded centuries ago, there is no creed to be found in Hinduism, let alone one that involves accepting the cow as sacred or divine. Silly statements like that of the CM stem from a completely degenerated parroting of claims about Hinduism copied from the Western-Christian stories about this ‘religion’. Much like Christians “believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth,” these stories suggest, Hindus “believe in the sacred cow.” The fact that this transforms the Hindus into fools is not on the radar of this high-level ‘Hindu nationalist’.

This politician, then, is merely doing in a particularly silly way what Indians have been doing for over two centuries: reproduce the Western-Christian accounts about ‘the Hindu religion’ while understanding neither the claims nor the implications of these accounts. In the case of the cow as “an article of faith,” this would perhaps sound funny, if it had not been for the legislation and interventions in Indian social life with which it goes hand in hand. The CM again: “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.” Again, we can easily ridicule this claim: if the constitution does not allow anyone to say anything that offends anyone else, then it would lead to a breakdown of human interaction. No wife could tell her husband anything that may happen to offend him; people would not be allowed to make fun of each other; cartoons, sarcasm, and satire will need to be banned from the media. Still, this politician states very crudely what is more and more becoming the case: if you present yourself as the ‘representative’ of a community and warn that some practice or statement hurts the religious sentiments of your community, then you can impose your ‘religious sentiments’ on all other Indians. If enough people say that ‘eating beef hurts their sentiments’, the laws banning consumption of beef become justified, or so it seems.

How did we get here? To answer this question, we need to examine how Indians succumbed to the Western-Christian discourse about their culture and its traditions. We need to find out the process through which they adopted and distorted so many claims about the beliefs and practices of ‘Hinduism’, including those about ‘the sacred cow’ and its ‘worship’. How could Indians accept these disguised Christian-theological claims as facts about their own culture and society? We should also examine as to how this distorted parroting of ill-understood clichés gave rise to political movements and legal acts. In the case of the sacred cow, this goes back at least to the nineteenth-century Arya Samaj and Bal Gangadhar Tilak and their cow protection movements.

The focus on the cow was part of the sanitized and ‘unified’ version of ‘Hinduism’ that the Arya Samaj promoted under the leadership of Swami Dayananda Saraswati. They wanted to create a Protestant version of ‘the Hindu religion’, with its own sacred scriptures and catechisms and rid of ‘idol worship’. Thus, they thought they would bring the religion back to its pure and unadulterated form. Like the Protestant critics of the false religion of Hinduism, they also accepted that the cow was sacred to the Hindus. Once their Swami had formulated ‘the Light of Truth’ as the true doctrine of Hinduism to be accepted by all in the Arya nation, the Arya Samajis went on a proselytizing mission to bring all Indians under the scope of this ‘religion’. Thus, they generated huge conflict between

Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and others in the North of India. By starting their 'cow protection movement', they also began to impose their idiosyncratic understanding of the status of the cow in Hinduism onto all other Indians. In fact, this movement, later joined by that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, made 'cow protection' into distinctive features of 'the Hindu community' in contradistinction to the Muslim community, which ate beef but not pork, and the British colonial masters who ate both. Little did they realize that they were in fact saying that the Hindus are a bunch of idolaters.

From its inception, the Sangh Parivar followed the lines of the Arya Samaj: trying to create a sanitized version of Hinduism, linking this to a nation with a territory, trying to do proselytizing work ('shuddhi' and now 'ghar wapsi') and 'service to society' ('seva') much like the Christian missionaries did. All the while, the Hindu nationalists succumbed to the Western-Christian colonial story about Indian culture, merely changing the explicit and superficial evaluative judgement from 'negative' to 'positive'. It is no different with the cow. While this animal undoubtedly has a special status in some of the Indian traditions, Hindutva accepted that the sacred cow belongs to the essence of Hinduism. Thus, it needed to be imposed onto the entire nation. But the Sangh Parivar is not the only organization in India that embraced 'the sacred cow' as an essential characteristic of the Hindu traditions. In most states in India, the slaughter of cows is legally banned or restricted; most of these laws were passed by Congress governments.

Now turn to the opponents of the beef bans; those who say that they are manifestations of religious intolerance and violations of freedom and secularism. Obviously, these people also accept that Hindus refrain from eating beef because of religious reasons; only then is it sensible to see the bans as the state's imposition of religious beliefs or practices onto all citizens. Thus, they also adopt the Western-Christian story about the worship of the holy cow in Hinduism: only in this framework, can this be viewed as a religious practice based in the belief that the cow is sacred. These liberals and secularists suffer from all the same defects as the Hindu nationalists: reproducing terms and ideas from the Christian-theological discourse without having any understanding of them ('worship', 'sacred', 'divine', 'religion'); distorting these terms and ideas while parroting them and thus making them incoherent; thinking that they are making revolutionary statements, while they are in fact promoting the most regressive form of colonial consciousness.

However, in their case, there is an even deeper sense in which they accept that the Hindu traditions embody idolatry and false religion. Valiantly, they call for symbolic fights for their right to have the food they want. They call for beef parties and barbecues. But these same liberals and secularists do not fight for the right to have pork parties next to a mosque or to prepare roasted pig in Muslim neighbourhoods and countries. Why is that? Fear perhaps. But then, considering that the entire story about the sacred cow, which they also reproduce, is part of a larger Christian critique of false religion and devil worship, there is another dimension: they indeed see Hinduism as a superstitious and idolatrous religion, far inferior to the religions of the Book, Islam and Christianity. In practice, they are accepting that Hinduism is devil worship, while Muslims and Christians worship the true God. After all, in the case of Islam, it is Allah who has commanded that the believers should not have pork; in the case of Hinduism, the refusal to have beef is but a silly superstitious practice, so the implicit and sometimes explicit reasoning of the secularists goes.

All these dimensions of the beef ban debate reflect where India is today. Currently, the choice for educated Indians is between Scylla and Charybdis, between the devil and the deep blue sea: either you wish to be a proud defender of Hindu culture and then you are compelled to accept the Hindu

nationalist gloss of the Western-Christian colonial story about India; or you wish to be liberal and modern and then you swallow the secularist gloss of the same story. It is high time to tell a new story about India. Like Odysseus, we can only hope that we will lose as few sailors as possible on the way.