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## Criminalising Beef, Not Dairy

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Cattle protection laws that selectively criminalise the possession and consumption of one among the several key products derived from cattle as reason for the slaughter ban is based on a flawed policy heavily influenced by human identity politics. PHOTO: Yamini Narayanan

*Is the beef ban really about protecting animals? By challenging conventional notions of animal welfare that are deeply couched in a lop-sided religious understanding, **Yamini Narayanan** holds the dairy industry more culpable for cruelty to cattle than the beef industry. To be effective and meaningful, animal protection laws, she says, should make a departure from an anthropocentric framework.*

The Maharashtra beef ban, regarded as one the toughest cattle protection laws in India to date, has been hotly contested due to its roots in religion and caste. As per the Presidential affirmation of the Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Bill, 1995, bulls and bullocks, previously allowed to be killed if deemed 'fit-for-slaughter',

as well as calves, are also unconditionally within the ambit of slaughter prohibition. Even the possession or sale of beef in Maharashtra is now a cognisable criminal offence, carrying simple imprisonment of five years and a fine of Rs. 10,000. The slaughter prohibition is driven by the iconic status of the cow and bull as sacred in Hinduism, particularly among the upper-castes.

However, what is amazing is the deafening silence around the anthropocentrism, or the belief in the centrality of humans over all other sentient creatures that is so deeply internalised within the human species. Anthropocentric worldviews regard only (usually privileged) human realities as valid, and have no means for engaging with living nonhuman experiences. Do such acts that ban cow and oxen slaughter really grasp the realities of the animal condition and welfare? Or are the bans in place because the ban itself testifies to a larger adherence to religious norms and culture?

In this piece I argue that apart from animal welfare groups, most forget that a sentient, living, terrorised animal is right at the centre of the broiling controversy. Second, I suggest that it is difficult to fully rejoice at purported animal protection laws that have human identity politics at the heart of the ban. One needs to be suspicious of cattle protection laws that are *not explicitly about animal welfare and protection in their own right*, in full recognition of the horrific, mass-scale abuse endured by cattle, and indeed all milch animals in India. Third, I argue that it is necessary to look not only at slaughter and the beef industry as objects of legislation, but also at the conditions in the dairy industry, which follows practices and norms that are far more cruel than the beef industry.

Cattle protection legislation that selectively criminalises the possession and consumption of *one* among the several key products derived from cattle - most notably dairy - as reason for the slaughter ban reflects a flawed policy heavily influenced by human identity politics. The silence around dairy's role in cattle slaughter shows how phenomenally off-the-mark the ostensible protectionist aims of the beef ban are. India is the world's largest producer of milk, and in India in particular; it is dairy that keeps the entire life cycle of cattle lucrative, much more than beef does.

Why am I making this argument? In the course of my research on animal slaughter in India, I discovered that the dairy industry used extremely cruel practices to extract milk from animals. After their milch days were over the cattle were then turned over to the slaughter industry. However, it is essential for me to stress repeatedly here that the act of cruelty for these cattle began much before they were groomed for the slaughterhouse. The cruelty was introduced, in a uniquely gendered way, literally from birth and expressly for the mass production of milk.

Indeed, Verghese Kurien, the father of India's White Revolution had bluntly opposed the cow-slaughter prohibition as early as the 1960s on the basis that if India wanted cheap and plentiful milk, it had to kill its cattle on a mass-scale, as soon as the limits of dairy exploitation of the animals had been achieved. The terms 'useless', 'unproductive' and 'uneconomical' cattle are dairy-speak to justify slaughter.

### **Agonising production process**

Cattle experience unimaginable misery to serve human dairy needs: female cattle no older than children are forced in what is for them, a forced sex routine of repeated pregnancies to produce milk till they are slaughtered for being 'useless'. Female cattle suffer severe abuse to increase milk production, and agonise each time they are separated from their calves after birth so humans can consume their milk.

Male-calf infanticide is rampant to support lifelong human dairy wants. In the end, all 'spent' cattle, regardless of age, gender, health or species, are transported in unthinkable cruel conditions to inhumane slaughterhouses throughout the country once their utility for dairy is exhausted.

All human communities, regardless of caste or religion consume copious amounts of dairy, everyday, and usually for the entirety of their life from birth to death. Aside from dietary consumption, even Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religions centrally rely on dairy. Major Shiva and Krishna temples of North India for instance each pour over 45,000 litres of milk per week on their deities during peak festival months. The smallest and most innocuous of Hindu rituals, from marriage to simple blessings, cannot proceed without milk or ghee as sacred offerings. Any meaningful cattle protection legislation must address the sheer and increasing scale of dairy consumption throughout India, regardless of communities.

The protection selectively extended to only cows, bulls and their progeny - excluding buffaloes from its ambit - exposes the extent to which cattle protection, a sacred Hindu ethic is misunderstood or even strategically abused. Mahatma Gandhi interpreted cow-protection as 'protection of the whole dumb creation of God'. The cow to him represented 'the entire sub-human world'. Cow protection is *not* about protecting *only* the cow.

To pretend that the buffalo is up for exploitation - an animal that is used, almost part-by-part in identical ways to the cow (with the glaring prohibition of buffalo dairy use in Hindu rituals as s/he is perceived to be a lower-caste bovine) - while the cow is not, is a convenient delusion that is rooted in religious hypocrisy and customer convenience. Rather, cow protection is a means for humans to transcend our limiting and illusory anthropocentrism, to take 'the human being beyond his species'.

'Hindus', Mahatma Gandhi believed, 'are enjoined to protect the cow by their *tapasya*, by self-purification, by self-sacrifice'. The task of cow-protection thus involves actively making self-aware choices by recognising animal sentience, and by abstaining from the temptation of consuming animals and animal-related products.

What can genuine cattle protectionism look like in 2015 that is truly reflective of the realities - and not the fantasies - of the all-round cattle industry in India? Indeed, this question must extend to all animals and birds, fully sentient, cognitive, alive and terrified, whose bodies are utilised for human consumption - goats, sheep, hens and ducks, pigs and fish, among many others. The reality includes taking cognisance of the fact that human utilisation of birds and animals may never be fully eliminated - *but it can be fully regulated*. In the case of cattle specifically, a responsible government and citizenry in India must enable the following:

First, bring dairy - and all products derived from cattle - into public and policy debate. Dairy's link with the extreme torture of all cattle *must* be clearly understood and publicised, especially given the India's absolute domination of the global dairy industry. In 2013-14, the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) placed India's anticipated annual milk production at 137.6 million tonnes. <sup>1</sup>

The U.S. Department of Agriculture noted that India's national consumption of dairy in 2014 nearly matched its dairy exports. In five short years by 2020, NDDB's 'National Dairy Plan' aims to push milk output to 200 million tonnes. The rampant use of artificial insemination, the root cause of the exponential cattle population explosion — and the subsequent mass slaughter — in India to increase dairy production must be emphatically revisited.

As responsible citizens and state, we must learn to hear the words 'vegan' and 'veganism' without flinching, and give these lifestyles a fair hearing. Even aside from animal protection, the environmental and economic case for increased veganism cannot be denied, and which the Indian state cannot afford to ignore.

Second, all animal products must be priced fairly. This means accounting for the costs of complete physical and psychological health and welfare of the animal concerned through its entire lifecycle. In India the price of milk is less than \$1 a litre <sup>2</sup> (cheaper in many cases than a litre of petrol <sup>3</sup>). [INR / 1 USD = 62.7450, March 12, 2015. Source: Reserve Bank of India]

This deflated price is possible because cows, bulls, buffaloes and their calves are the ones heavily subsidising the real price of these products through the extreme torture and agony inflicted on their own bodies by us. Overloading of cattle in trucks, the continuous starvation endured by over 80 per cent of our cattle, their diet of plastics and toxins, and scant regard for humane butchery all contribute to our cheap dairy

Indeed, the Maharashtra ban can even be more chillingly brutal for cattle, if slaughter is outsourced and they are overloaded ever more tightly into trucks headed for Kerala, a State that consumes 5,000 tonnes of meat every day <sup>4</sup> and other States where slaughter is not prohibited.

Clearly we must not forget the human case for fair pricing of animal products. It is true that tens of thousands of humans are directly dependent on cattle industry in India. Notably however, the overwhelming majority of these humans are poor, and the industry is worth millions. Inconsistent? Yes.

The thousands of butchers and transporters at the very lowest rung of the industry make barely a few thousand rupees of profit per week. Across illegal and legal slaughterhouses in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, I discovered that the hide of a single cow or buffalo makes a sale of Rs. 200 per animal. It is the polished business suits managing the large slaughterhouses and meat processing plants that rake in the big money, and of course, the real profits from the tortured flesh on the plate and the tormented ice cream in the tub is enjoyed by the overseas importers of Indian animal products.

Absolutely fair and carefully-accounted pricing of animal products can help most in bringing down demand and curbing slaughter - and also investing instead in cheaper, healthier, non-animal alternatives. There are massive cruelty-free industries waiting to be made and created which can provide sustainable employment to the thousands displaced by any closure of animal-based factories. A committed government is highly capable of regulating and managing the fair economics - fair to the animals concerned - of animal-based industries.

Last but most emphatically not the least, we need to recognise that slaughter alone is hardly the only stage of a cattle's lifecycle that is crucial to their protection. Every stage of their lives should be healthy and natural. In the case of working animals, this includes planning for a well-deserved retirement to the maximum extent possible. It is time for a well-rounded critique of the futility and falsity of the worldview that assumes anthropocentrism to be the natural planetary order. As feminists have long reminded us, 'the personal is political' and our lifestyle choices - dietary, consumption patterns and religious beliefs - must each be put under the microscope to consider the rights and agency of the political nonhuman animal.

**References:**

1. [^ National Dairy Development Board. 2014. Annual Report 2013-14. Anand. Accessed March 10, 2015.](#)
2. [^ National Cooperative Dairy Federation of India Ltd. 2015. Civil Consumer Prices of Milk. Accessed March 11, 2015.](#)
3. [^ Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. 2015. Petro Prices. March 11. Accessed March 11, 2015.](#)
4. [^ The Hindu. 2011. State tops in meat consumption. Sept. 6. Accessed March 10, 2015.](#)