

Politicization of The Cow in Colonial India

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Abstract

The sanctity of the cow in Indian subcontinent has been divided into three interlinked dimensions of economy, polity and religion. These three factors were earlier seen arising as an intrinsic part of Hinduism, and then later due to the friction between Hinduism and Islam. The attempt of this paper is to take a look at the third dimension which is that of the British and their interference in the politico-socio sphere of the country which gave the cow an added impetus as a political symbol. Furthermore, the historicity of cow and its politicization will be ascertained in great details.

Key words: *Symbolism, Colonial India, Cow Protection Movements, Riots, Conflict, Communalism*

Introduction

The Vedas contain numerous sacred allusions to the cow, identifying it with the totality of the universe. The Atharvaveda, for example, calls the cow the "all-producing and all-containing universe." This cosmic association in the Rig Veda formed the base on which its sanctification was given later. However what is also clear from the many verses of the Vedas was that the *animal itself* was not considered inviolable.

It is with the coming of Buddhism and Jainism that the concept of ahimsa came to be idolized and equated with the cow. The Brahmanical texts by now had begun treating ahimsa as dogma but it gained a firmer ground when Gandhi used the cow as a "poem of piety" during the freedom movement. Some even think that it was during the medieval times that this happened to be so when the Muslim raids and the slaughter of the animal at the Idu-'l-azha festival may have led to increase in its devotion.

Thus cows held both economic and religious importance. Their economic value of the past had, in the course of time, translated to a religious streak. It was to change even more over the years.

Anand A. Yang states that often polarities between religion are seen as residing in bigger factors, with political agendas figuring in as well. However these fail to look at the 'objective

differences'¹ between groups which over time acquire symbolic significance, then translating into group consciousness and ultimately become the basis for political demand.

The cow is one such symbol which stands as an “objective difference” between the Hindus and the Muslims, primarily so because both the religions have different stands on it. This objective difference fed on the economic and religious significance that it had held which eventually translated into it becoming a badge of identity for the Hindus and hence entering the political realm.

Emotions around the cow can be seen from a triangular perspective. There were the Hindus for whom the issue of cow was one for which their thoughts, ideas and decisions were unfaltering. At the other end were the Muslims who were divided in their attitude towards the cow, some choosing to show their solidarity with the Hindus while others being unwavering in their attitude about claiming their dining rights over the cow. At the apex were the British, a foreign power which had no cultural or ideological attachments with the cow, and yet was caught up in the vortex surrounding it. It is interesting to see that despite the ‘unconnectedness’ that the British shared on the issue of cow, in the end it was them who made it into a much greater issue than it actually was. The economic and religious significance of the cow was thus given a political tenor by the presence of the British.

A major proclamation in 1849 by the British made on the issue of the cow stated that “The British Government will leave to all the people, whether Mussalman, Hindu or Sikh, the free exercise of their own religions; but it will not permit any man to interfere with others in the observance of such forms and customs as their respective religions may either enjoin or permit.”

This was the catalyst, the spark which pushed things over the edge. Because tension around the cow had always been a simmering affair between the Hindus and the Muslims, but kept low because of the policies undertaken by the power systems earlier, such as the Mughals, who had a fairly liberal policy when it came to protecting the cow. And yet now here was another group of people who denied forming any such policy which would enable the Hindus to protect the animal that it deemed as religiously significant.

As concern over this basic religious symbol heightened, boundaries were redefined. The sacred became generalized in daily routines and living space itself became ritualized. Moreover, the issue of the cow touched the religious sensibilities of many Hindus because it started to relate to their self-definition as a community.

¹ Anand A. Yang, Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India: Community Mobilization in the ‘Anti-Cow Killing’ Riot of 1893, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 576-596, October 1980, p. 576

Thus now the sacred symbol and sacred space divided Hindus and Muslims, as well as the former from the British. The issue of the cow built fences not just between people with longstanding experience of one another, namely Hindus and Muslims, but also heightened division between relative strangers, Hindus and the British.

What is obvious though is that the British knew that bringing such a rule would incite reactions from both ends, presumably first the Muslims who would make full use this which was bound to provoke counter reaction from the Hindus as well. Personal correspondences clearly shows that they are mindful of this which is why they send out clear messages for the civil officers of the newly annexed districts to ²carefully and strictly regulate the slaughter of kine in their districts from both the natives and the Europeans, to render it as little offensive as possible to the prejudices of the Hindu population. It was not permitted within the bounds of cities, towns, or villages where Hindus and Muslims were mixed, but asked to be removed to a distance of not less than 300 yards, and even then to be away from any thoroughfare. Civil officers were to appoint a shop themselves where the butchers could sell their goods and it was strictly forbidden for the Muslims to either open such a shop near any Hindu neighbourhood or expose the sale of beef in their shops. There was also mandated severe punishment for those would break these rules and deliberately do something that they knew would 'offend their Hindu neighbours'³.

Soon after this proclamation was passed, ordinary rioting increased from one in 1862 to nine in 1863⁴, an increase of fourteen cases of riotous conduct on the streets from 1866-67 to 1867-68 in Oudh⁵ and in Bombay alone 562 cases in the year 1867-68. Police reports confirm that most of these had cow as the major issue.

Disturbance on the issue of the cow began to increase from the 1870s. As the news of riots and uprisings spread from one village to another, whole districts, towns and cities started to experience an escalation in crisis. The matter could be as small as mere suspicion over the killing of a cow, or the actual killing of one on days when the Hindu festival of Ram Navmi and the Muslim festival of Muharram happened to coincide.

Bareilly is a fine example for how the British intervention led to situation in the region going from bad to worse. In 1837 when the two festivals coincided there was a slight scuffle between the two communities when the Muslims objected to the Hindus carrying out their procession but which was quickly sorted out with the Hindus agreeing that they would not carry out their demonstrations so publically. In 1851 and 1852 when the festivals fell again on the same day, though the proclamation on 1849 had already been made, there was again no rioting between the

² Correspondence of April 1849 related to kine slaughter in Punjab, Letter sent from HB Edwardes to Hugh James

³Ibid.

⁴ Home Department, Police branch, Police reports, September 1864, No23-25

⁵ Home department , Police branch, Police reports, August 1868, Nos, 46-48, Oudh District

two communities possibly because the British officers were vigilant about stemming any conflicts that might come up. They reported hostile feelings on both sides, in fact they pointed out that earlier Hindus were more prone to taking out vehement demonstrations.⁶

By 1870 however when the festivals coincided again the Hindus on getting the news that a cow was being readied to be sacrificed, grew violent and refused to conform to the agreement that there would be no more demonstrations. The British had to legally clamp down by issuing a law banning all sorts of demonstrations to pass through the centre of the town noting that “fostered by a long series of party hostilities and misunderstandings, jealousy and intolerance have become deeply rooted on both sides, and the public processions are looked to rather as a means of rioting than as the performance of religious obligations”.⁷

Such cow protection movements which flared the most in Punjab, Awadh, Rohilkhand, North West Provinces gained momentum with the founding of the Arya Samaj and its founder Dayanand Saraswati. In 1881 Gokarunanidhi was published by Dayanand and an year after that the first Gaurakshini Sabha or cow protection society emerged in Punjab where the Kuki tribe led by Ram Singh took the cow up as a mark of their identity and difference from the British.

From its beginnings in Punjab which saw the beginning of the cow protection movements, the issue of the cow spread rapidly especially due to the speed of communications. According to British administrators, the press, telegraphs and railways served as the medium for disturbances because “a riot which occurs in any place even the most remote is speedily heard of all over India”.⁸

Important stops in the itineraries of people who spread the message of the movement called gau-swamis were markets and fairs which provided large audiences. Fairs were especially successful recruiting ground for the Sabha because of the large crowds present there. Furthermore, some fairs dramatized the immediacy of cow protection because they were also the venue of major cattle trade markets.

Gaushalas played an important role in highlighting the sacredness of the cows. They were originally meant to be an asylum for old cows which translated to becoming an opportunity for people to participate in this noble act which would mean that they would “remain in heaven...will be called gods”.⁹

⁶ Home department, Public branch- Part A, August 1871, Nos, 145-147

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Lord Lansdowne to Secretary of State for India, 27th Dec. 1893, in Public and Judicial Papers, L/P&J/6/365, 1894

⁹ Translation of Gari Benair, (prayer of the cow), Madhubani Gaurakshini Sabha, Darbhanga, Forbes Report, Appendix E.

The move to create shelters for the cows provided both a focus for concern and instilled a powerful vision of the urgency of the cause of cow protection. Other activities, such as fund-raising, also served as a means to participate as well as to be informed. In collecting donations, tin boxes were stamped with the image of the cow and set up in locations as bazaars, post offices and shops. Local sabhas also collected subscriptions from all Hindus.

Initially the message of cow protection was stated in eclectic terms, later however the issue was seen as defining people's relationships and activities. Under the Sabha's influence, many everyday routines took on a different order. In many villages, Muslims were not given access to wells. In others, the pots in which the village Kandhu [grain-parcher) had parched the corn both of Muslims and Hindus alike were now ordered to be broken. New pots were made for the same.

It is clear that in most cases the issue of the cow divided not just the Hindus from the Muslims but also the British from both. Thus boundaries were redrawn in relation to these groups.

The movement is seen spreading to places like Indore where official reports show how the shopkeepers had shut down their shops in defiance. Things had worsened to such an extent that the British considered the nature of the cow preservation movement as “dangerous”¹⁰ exemplifying how it was possible for a crowd of normally reticent banyahs to find it easy, when their religious feelings have been sufficiently played upon by fanatics, to incite and abet in illegal actions, one of which was the illegal seizing of cattle which belonged to the Commissariat butchers.

The British were aware of the concept of the Pinjrapole which was a refuge of cattle and other animals kept by the bania community. Men kept watch that no Muslim would be able to buy a cow for slaughter. Whenever cattle were found passing through Indore in circumstances that led to the suspicion that they were destined for the Commissariat, the agents of the banias intercepted and carried them off. “A cow once placed in the Pinjrapol thus came to be under the protection of the Hindu religion.”¹¹

Serious riots broke out in places like Rangoon, Bombay, Certain districts of North West Provinces and Oudh in 1893. Things took a turn for the worse especially in Punjab which had sown the seeds of cow preservation in the country. Officials seemed to be aware that in Punjab previous to annexation kine slaughter was a capital offence. When that province was taken under British rule this was forbidden.

¹⁰ F. Heuway to the Secretary General of the Govt of India, 27th Jan. 1890 in Foreign department, Internal-B, Feb 1890, No. 511/514

¹¹ Ibid

The riots at Rangoon arose in consequence of an order issued by the Magistrate prohibiting the sacrifice of kine in a locality where the Muslim inhabitants had for a number of years been in the habit of sacrificing without hindrance.

Similarly the riot in Bombay appears to have been mainly due to the infection spread by the riot which had broken out in other parts of India, and especially those at Prabas Patan and the uneasy feeling generated through Muslims that Islam and the followers of that faith generally were suffering at the hands of the Hindus.

Herein we see how the presence of the British may have further exacerbated the cow problem in India. While there had been a history of a long succession of Muslim kings there is proof that most of them were strict on the idea of cow slaughter knowing how sensitive the issue was for the Hindu masses. But now came a government which said the opposite and refused to ban the killing of cows, something which the Muslims must have taken advantage of and further enraged the Hindus.

The Sabha leaders in addition to inflammatory language distributed throughout the country pictures of the cow, of a kind calculated to appeal to the sentiments of many. One of these pictures depicted a cow in the act of being slaughtered by Muslims, while another showed a cow, in every part of whose body groups of Hindu deities and holy persons were drawn, being assailed by a monster with a sword entitled the 'Kali Yuga', but which had been largely understood as typifying the Muslim community.¹² A woman was shown sitting with a bowl waiting her turn as the calf drank the milk, while the man with the sword stood above the cow's head. The meaning explained was that the Hindu took the milk from the cow only after the calf had been satiated. "As every man drinks cow's milk just as he as an infant has drawn milk from his mother, the cow must be regarded as the universal mother, and so is called 'Gao mata'. It is matricide to kill the cow....All the gods dwell in the cow, so to kill the cow is to insult every Hindu."¹³

Gaurakshnini Sabhas opened up in other places as well such as in the district of Gaya founded in 1887. In the beginnings it was a voluntary organization but in time it began to be levied upon all Hindus as a religious tax.

While earlier such organizations were token in character and a byproduct of the organizations forming elsewhere the earliest attempt for the preservation of kine appears to have been in 1889 when there was an attempt to stop the killing of cows for Id sacrifice. In 1891 a serious riot broke out on Gaya due to the "ostentatious parading through the Hindu quarter of a sacrificial cow by some ill conditioned Muslims and while the Gaurakshsini Sabha could not be held directly responsible for what took place, there is no doubt its teaching had done much to excite public

¹² Home department, Public A, December 1893, Nos.210-213

¹³ Ibid

feeling on the subject”¹⁴. The sudden increase in rioting on the cow issue in March of the same year was attributed to “the violent and inflammatory language used by the petty agent...in cattle fairs to discourage the sale of kine to Muhammadans.”¹⁵

Their message spread to other places which eventually gave rise to the riot at Salempur and Fatuha in 1892, Mashauardi in 1893, serious riot at Hilsa in June 1893 while the Darbhanga movement seems to have started as far back as 1885.

As riots increased so did the formation of new sabhas at places like Sarna, Champaran, Muzzafarnagar and they were most active in Saran, Darbhanga and Shahabad.¹⁶

By the early 1900s the British had become extremely cautious about riots over the cow and increased their man power to either prevent them from happening in the first place or to be able to quickly quell them if they did occur. They came down sharply on anything that might cause provocation, including pamphlets, pictures or articles that they thought could abet incitement. An example of this is proscription of certain publications under the Indian Press Act, one of which was a picture entitled ‘Asthabuja Devi’ in which a Hindu goddess of the same name was depicted astride a lion, charging upon two butchers who had apparently decapitated a cow. This was to be forfeited on the grounds that ‘the picture is likely to stir acts of violence, and to bring into hate and contempt of certain classes.’¹⁷

The Hindus realized that claiming a ban of the slaughter of cow on religious reasons was not going to alter the stance of the British. They now began to cite economic reasons to stop cow slaughter.

One such petition¹⁸ in 1911 shows us how the Hindus couched their real reason in economic terms, hoping that the British with their practical way of analyzing things would accept the claims and hence ban cow slaughter.

The petition thus attributed the suffering in the land to the steady deterioration and gradual extinction of the breed of agricultural cattle of the country, the bullock and the cow, owing to indiscriminate slaughter for purposes of food and trade in hide. It clearly stated that it was not the object of the petitioners to dwell upon the religious aspect of the question and afford any cause of sectarian consciousness or racial feeling but instead to only bring to light certain economic laws which were well known to all but whose significance might not have been so fully clear to the understanding of a government, however well intentioned, mainly composed of foreigners.

¹⁴ Note on the Cow Protection Agitation in Gorakhpur District,

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶From Commissioner of the Patna Division to Chief Secretary of the Government of Bengal, 27th October 1893

¹⁷ Section 12 of the Indian Press Act, 1910 in Home department, Political Branch, November 1911, No. 142-152

¹⁸ From Baba Bhagwan Das, manager of Sarva Deshi Gau Hitkari Office, Haridwar to Lord Charles Hardinge, 30th Oct 1911 in Home department, Political Branch B, November 1911, No. 141

They then list out the economic uses of the cattle, very clearly hiding their true religious intentions behind the facet of economy. This becomes very clear when the last paragraph of the petition stated ‘Nor do the petitioners wish to refer to the religious aspect of the question beyond merely stating that the slaughter of kine for the purposes of sacrifice is not made obligatory by the scriptures of any religion’¹⁹. This was thus a clear dig at the Muslim who were more prone to killing and/or selling the cow. To further back up this view is when the petition ends with the comment that their view had received support from eminent Muslim authorities like the Amir of Afghanistan and the Sheikh-ul-Islam of Constantinople who in 1890 or 1891 had issued a proclamation enjoining upon his followers the protection of the cow and her offspring. The large number of signatures appended to this memorial, amounting to about 5 lakhs, represented Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains and Buddhists, clearly attempted to show that all communities inhabiting India were equally interested in the protection of the animal.

A resolution in the legislative assembly by Raja Raghunanand Prasad Singh regarding the slaughter of cows²⁰ and for the immediate passing of effective measures to stop the indiscriminate slaughter of milch cows and prime cattle throughout British India except for purposes strictly religious and in cases of utmost necessity.

They knew that having already stated so many times that it was not religiously important for the Muslims to have to sacrifice a cow on Id and they could make do with other animals, if this resolution was passed then it would become mighty easy for Hindus to state the fact that since such a ban was prevalent the Muslims now had no right to kill the cow on Id.

They even cited history in order to try and coax the British to stop cow slaughter saying that as a matter of state policy cow killing had for long been banned. They gave the example of the emperors like Akbar and Shah Alam who had ordered prohibition by *shahi farman* and *fatwas* issued to kazis and maulvis for the purpose. There was also the reminder that even during the rule of the East India Company, a circular had been issued on the 22nd September 1852 by a British officer on behalf of the Emperor Bahadur Shah enjoining upon all, the protection of kin. By taking the name of the Mughals they thus sent a clear message to the British that since the empire before them did the same the Hindus expected the same from them as well. The legacy of banning cow slaughter was something that was even respected and helped to be implemented by the East India Company and thus as the natural successors it became a necessity on the part of the British to continue the same.

Another petition on similar lines in 1912 was made by the residents of Muttra on compassionate grounds as well as bringing to light an order issued by Lord Lake in 1805, prohibiting the slaughter of cows in Muttra. However this was pointed out to be ‘nothing more than a temporary

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ On 14th September, 1927 in Home department, Political branch, 1930, No. 22/80

order issued for the guidance of the Army under Lord Lake's command during its occupation of Muttra.²¹

A letter²² in 1940 even suggested that the British should substitute soy bean for meat which was a better source of food and that they should also remember Christ's life and his commandment that 'Thou Shall not kill' and also quoted that 'He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man'.

In a eulogy of the cow they even reproduced a text from Malcolm Patterson, the Governor of Tennessee which had been published in the New Health magazine.

They resorted to humanitarian measures and stated that the prohibition of cows instead of being a departure from religious neutrality would in fact be 'a real act of mercifulness towards millions of dumb animals on which the agricultural wealth of India and the very existence of its inhabitants depended.'²³

The Hindus also tried to play onto the British desire of pomp and show and the celebration of their kingdom and the country. They thus tried finding different auspicious occasions for the proclamation of the prohibition of cow slaughter. Some petitions mentioned that the coronation of George V in the Delhi Durbar would be the perfect time for this because 'all the good wishes of the people of the country would be heaped on him leading to a long and successful reign on his part.' Similarly another memorial proposed that the visit of the King and Queen of England would be the perfect time for issuing such a prohibition. Such petitions were put forward by dangling in front of the official the bait that doing such a move would earn them the gratitude of millions of Hindu inhabitants of India. However such appeals were always rejected.

From 1900 to the 1910, almost a period of ten years, the country had thus seen a relative quiet when it came to rioting on the issue of the religious cow. This could have been because of two reasons, both interlinked, one because the British had tightened their preparedness to handle such cases, and two the sabhas on realizing that they had more to lose than gain by irregular periodic riots across the countryside.

In these ten years thus these gau sabhas seemed somewhat of a lax nature to the British. Private papers showed their barely hidden jubilation at the fact that they had managed to subdue them. In 1910 they were reported to 'consist chiefly of lectures by enthusiasts...and the foundation of new sabhas and gaushalas in various parts of the provinces occurred, often with somewhat meager

²¹ Letter from Government of the United Provinces on 5th March 1910 in Home department, Political A, Simla Records, Confidential Proceedings, January 1912, Nos. 71-73.

²² From Gorakshini Sabha of Ludhiana to Secretary of the Government of India, 1940, Home department, Political(1), 1940, No. 223/1940

²³ Home department, Political A, Simla Records, Confidential Proceedings, January 1912, Nos. 71-73

results...no very serious instances of friction between Hindus and Muslims over the question of cow sacrifice at the Bakr Id'.²⁴

From 1911 however, a new impetus was given to the gaurakhshini movement by the 'monster petitions' ideas, which emanated from two sources, KS Jassawala from Jubbulpore and Baba Bhagwan Das of Hardwar. These monster petitions had a tendency to memorialize the government on the subject of cow killing. The line of argument adopted was laboriously economical.

It is clear that the British see the two as the instigators behind the rallying movement of these years since their idea of presenting the prohibition of cattle at the time of the Delhi Durbars was an extensive propaganda. One result of the scheme was the coming together of the Hindu ranks, and in particular the growth of a camaraderie between Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharma.

Lectures, speeches and pamphlets had always formed a part of the propaganda but now general impression conveyed that the torch had been handed on even more onto the political leaders and the press, who were better able to give speed to the movement.

New gaushalas were opened in Bulandshahar, Fatahepur, Shahjahanapur, Sahranpur, Sultanpur, Farukkhanbad and Aligarh districts, places which were predominantly Muslim in origin so as to prevent any cow killing to take place.

In Ayodhya situation had worsened to such an extent that the British had to resort to gun power to handle the situation which resulted in the killing of some natives. This was justified in a telegram²⁵ which telegram stated that the Indians had been protecting the cows themselves through the use of books and sabhas, all the while waiting for the British to themselves realize the importance of the animal in the Hindu faith 'but owing to the continued slaughter of the cow at Bakr Id the Hindu community began growing impatient and restless so much so that they deemed it their paramount duty to apprise the Government of that discontent and restlessness (through the use of riots).

Widespread agitation took place between the years of 1913 to 1915 especially in places like Ballia, Basti, Mehdumpur, Jaumpur, Hardoi, Muzaffarnagar, Bareilly, Farukkahabad, Azamgarh and Cawnpore. Most of these places showed the reaction to what had happened in Ayodhya.

The British noted that the friction at the bakr id, though intimately connected with the gaurakhshini movement can hardly be said to have arisen out of it. It seemed to that it was very

²⁴ Home department, Political A ,Simla Records, Secret, , December 1913, No. 1-4

²⁵ Sent from Ray Bishambar Nath Bahadur to the Secretary of the Government of India dated 28th Oct 1913 in Home department, Simla Records-Secret, Political A, December 1913, Nos. 1-4

difficult to foretell where trouble will occur and what causes will excite it: a village which has been quiet one year may blaze out the next.²⁶

The British reports thus indicate they may not know the plans which go on in a place behind them.

After 1912 two or three conclusions were drawn as per the British. One is that the Muslims were tending more and more to insist on their legal right to sacrifice the cows; this is of course a natural corollary of the High Court Ruling of 1908 whenever the British intervened we see a spike in the incidents related to the cow, either cow protection, cow killing, riots based on the cow, etc. Another point which emerges from the accounts of the Bakr Id troubles is that the Muslims were not prepared to show any regard for the places which were held in veneration by the Hindus furthermore because they got the chance to do so by the continued secular stance of the British. A third point to be noted is that agitation of this nature originated as a general rule in the more ignorant classes of both creeds. However this point can be questioned on the grounds that while followers of such movements may not belong to the “intellectual class” of the time, but the ones who provoked and instigated them were not of the lower class and for this we have example of people such as the Raja of Dera and the Maharaj of Balrampur, etc.

In spite of identifying the problem of cow slaughter the British continued to stick to their secular stand. Questions²⁷ submitted by the Indian in the legislative assembly asking what the government had done to stop cow slaughter was replied as ‘The matter is one with regard to which the government cannot, consistently with their policy of strict neutrality in religious matters, interfere.

Through the course of my paper the author has constantly tried to bring to light the importance that the British played in the making of the cow as a political symbol. The political dimension of the cow has been so because of its religious factors and the internal conflicts which emerged between the Hindus and the Muslims over it. However the author has tried to show that there was a third angle to this entire situation, i.e., the British, who had the largest role to play in according to the cow the status for which it is known today.

The British were in fact terrified of the cow as a symbol. The 1857 revolts and the major uprising that had happened because of the supposed beef and pork cartridges had already made them cautious about interfering, even by mistake, in the religious sensibilities of the Indians. Knowing that cow as a sacred symbol was holy for the Hindu (in a way that pork was not for the Muslims) they were warier about hurting the feelings of the Hindus over it, mindful that an uprising on the scale on 1857 was present on the horizon always.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Questions put forward by Girdhari Lal Aagarwal, Home department, Political Branch, 1922, No. 937

Their neutral stance throughout the years they ruled was due to a number of reasons; first they could not go against the principles laid down in the Magna Carta. As a country Britain was known for its secular stance, and even though several officials in India were sympathetic with the Hindus, they could not afford to let personal feelings override official laws. Secondly, taking a stance would mean either siding with the Hindus or the Muslims because it was not possible in the present scenario to take out a law that would satisfy both. It is not that the British didn't try to do that as well. There were multiple times when they sought to bring about a conciliation by keeping the sacrificial area far away from Hindu whereabouts, stopping beef to be exposed while being put up on sale to even forming a committee presided over by an Indian in order to make it feasible for them to come to a conclusion without external interference. However none of these ideas were successful and as a last resort they had no option but to continue with their secular policy of siding with neither community.

This secular policy proved to be the major cause of disturbance for the British. Before the coming of the British in the country rulers, either Hindu or Muslim, had a definite law with regard to cow slaughter. They either allowed it or they didn't, leaving little scope for either of the deprived communities to attempt to not follow the law apart from a few small uprisings here and there. What the British did was that they took a middle stand which left a lot of scope for both the communities to find loopholes in it. They faced an even greater rebellion perhaps because of the indignity felt by the natives because of their intervention in the cultural sphere.

The British in India, stuck within the limits of the Magna Carta and fearing the consequences that they would face back in their country on going against it had no option other than this. They could neither take the side of the Hindus due to the retaliation from the Muslims, nor that of the Muslims.

Symbols are effective because they are imprecise, i.e, most symbols do not have visual or physical expressions but are notions which do not impose a conformity of meaning. Thus, symbols are malleable-they can be made to fit the circumstances of the individual.²⁸ The cow had neither visual or physical expressions and this is the reason why it could be twisted and turned by whosoever.

To conclude, thus, in the 19th century, newly emerging middle-class Hindus saw the cow as a symbol of tradition defiled by Muslim rule. For them, the movement for a ban on cow-slaughter was a badge of identity, part of their quest for political power. Educated Muslims felt both excluded and scorned by these Hindu notions of the Indian past, leading them to develop their own separatist fantasies. Neither of the two could identify the real perpetrators behind this, the ones who had pushed the cow right into the center stage of political humdrum crisis which led to

²⁸ Cohen 1985: 12-28]

the symbol of the cow becoming an even greater symbol for the separation of the Hindu from the Muslim.

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