

Cow Protection Movement during the British Rule in India

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Introduction

India is home to followers of different religions but the majority professes to Hinduism. Muslim is the largest minority in India, who in spite of being in minority ruled India for hundreds of years. During the long rule of the Muslims in India, the Hindus remained subservient and passive. Once the Muslims lost their rule to the British, the Hindus slowly and gradually started asserting themselves which happens to be at the cost of Muslims. One such example is that of the issue of slaughtering of cow. Since the Muslims' religion permits the eating of cow meat, it is widely slaughtered during *Bakr Id* and other festivities. This act on the part of Muslims has always resulted in strong criticism from the Hindus and even resulted in violent riots.

In the late 19th century the Hindu Nationalists launched movements for the protection of cow in India. Though Muslims and British both were eaters of cow meat, the Hindus targeted Muslims, may be because they considered Muslims more vulnerable as compared to British, who were now the rulers. In the 20th century some Muslim politicians tried to find an amicable solution to the cow slaughtering issue, and they even suggested to Muslims to avoid cow slaughtering during *Bakr Id* and other festivities and encouraged them to slaughter sheep instead. However, the issue could not be resolved in spite of the efforts on both sides of the divide more particularly by the Muslims. Due to this reason India has seen many Hindu-Muslim riots resulting in loss of precious lives and properties.

Historical Background

Cow is a holy and sacred animal in the religion of Hindus. The Hindus extensively use dairy products extracted from cow milk and even dung. These products are considered nutritional and full of energy. "Panchagavya, a mixture of five products of cow, milk, curd, butter, urine, and dung, is consumed in Brahmanical rituals. The mixture is also smeared on ulcers as a healing product. The goddess Lakshmi is thought to reside in cow dung"ⁱ.

Due to reverence attached to cow, the Hindus consider any harm to cow as sacrilegious, which results in violence and riots. Swami Dayananda Saraswati in a treatise called *Gokarunanidhi*, (Ocean of mercy to the cow), published in 1881, earnestly advocated protection and strongly opposed the slaughter of cow. As a result of this vigorous campaign for the protection of cow, the first such society called *Gaurakshini sabha* came into existence in 1882 in Punjab. Swami Dayananda Saraswati and his organisation Arya Samaj gave it whole hearted support and popularized it amongst Hindus. The Swami and his followers widely travelled across India, preached and propagated cow protection which resulted in the establishment of Cow Protection Societies at different parts of India (Rehman n. d: 56).

These societies not only preached and propagated cow protection but also took some practical steps for it. The societies rescued wandering cows and placed them at specially established *gaushalas* (cow refuges). The societies provided financial support to these *gaushalas* by collecting charities from individualsⁱⁱ.

The issue gained so much importance with the Arya Samaj hierarchy that it split the advocates of cow protection and vegetarianism from non-vegetarian *Aryans* (Jones: 169-171). The issue assumed such great importance because it was at the same time linked to the worship of the cow as a deity, abhorrence for meat eating and the manifestation of the Hindu preference for non-violence against animalsⁱⁱⁱ. Cow protection became the defense of spiritual and social psyche of Hindus. And obviously, the target of this movement had to be the Muslims as they were meat eaters^{iv}. The theological debate on the issue was entangled in the second decade of twentieth century. This was evident from the Punjab Chronicle of 1918 which states that:

Leaving aside the question whether the ancient Aryan settlers of India revered the cow or not, it cannot be denied at present moment that vast millions of Hindus of India look upon the cow as a sacred being and invest her with a respect and sanctity which is only accorded to gods and goddesses^v.

It appears that the reasons why the Hindus stressed on cow protection were not historic but were more emotional in nature. The paper also warned that ignoring the Hindu feelings in this regard would be dangerous rather it also went on to link the whole issue of cow protection to a Hindu-Muslim *entente*. Thus it seemed that any peaceful settlement between the two communities had to be preceded by an amicable handling of the issue.

The difference between the Hindus and Musalmans on this question, which becomes dangerously acute every year at the time of 'Bakr-Eid' is no longer a religious question. In recent years it has become a grave political and administrative problem for political reforms and government officials alikeⁱ.

Muslims' abandonment of Cow slaughter

Although during the Khilafat Movement both communities came closer to each other, however the symbolic importance of cow protection did not go into oblivion. In fact it was one issue that was used for the unity of two communities. The Hindus expected the Muslims to end the 'improper emphasis on the sacrifice of Kine' and promotion of sacrifice as a 'national right' in return for the 'practical union' between the two communitiesⁱⁱ.

During this period Muslims also tried to come up with theological justifications for a compromise. From Muslim quarters, alternatives to the cow sacrifice were indicated. For instance, editor *Ahli Sunnat Jama'at*, Hakim Abuturab M. Abdul Haq, advocated that it was lawful to sacrifice sheep in place of goats and cowsⁱⁱⁱ. But the most significant and perhaps the most influential assertion of this reconciliatory spirit of Muslims was evident in the All India Muslim League's resolution of 1919^{iv} urging their community to abandon cow sacrifice at Hindu sacred places. Hindu commentators welcome the Resolution, as A. L. Roy opined:

...the resolution will be hailed by lovers of Hindu Mohammedan amity, which I use as a better word than unity, as having more a social significance than political one. For such amity can be placed on a sound and sure footing only when the members of the two communities enter into each other's feelings in matters which come home in their daily life, especially on the religious side on which both are keen; political interests are too shifting, sometimes too superficial to afford to such a basis^v.

However, the spirit of All India Muslim League's resolution and the optimism of A. L. Roy were not shared by all the influential members of their respective communities. The Muslim press viewed this move cynically and it was termed as a conspiracy to make the Muslims destroy their own religion. Parallels were drawn between Emperor Akbar's move to stop cow-sacrifice and the recent moves^{vi}. The Hindus, too, were fearful that the spirit was only a passing phase as it was a *quid pro quo* by the Muslims for the concessions awarded to them by Hindus, on separate electorates^{vii}.

The Hindus were not willing to give any space on the issue. It was evident even at the height of the Khilafat Movement, as one Hindu paper then wrote:

"Khilafat may win or Khilafat may fail, the cow question will remain open till it is settled to the satisfaction of the Hindus"^{viii}.

During the peaceful days of the Hindu-Muslim unity, the Muslims had not only voluntarily reduced cow slaughtering but had even accepted it in principle, in deference to the Hindu sentiments. However, the issue revived in 1923 due to antagonism created by the renewed vigor of Arya Samaj. Although the movement

got momentum under Samajists, yet the cow cause was not just the cause of Arya Samaj, but was of all the Hindus' hawks and moderates alike. Even Gandhi was unwilling to compromise over it as he advised Hindus to sacrifice their lives for '*gow maata*' (Salamat n. d: 208). During the Khilafat Movement, Hindu leadership made cow protection a litmus test for Hindu-Muslim cooperation. Although the British also slaughtered cow, the Hindus focused on the Muslims only. Gandhi clearly argued that the responsibility for the protection of kine should be placed on the Muslims. For the government, the only Hindu advice was to reconsider its policy on slaughter of cows in cantonments for economic reasons^{xiv}.

Sikhs and the Cow Slaughter

The Sikh behaviour on the cow debate was interesting. While the Kukas earlier had made an issue out of cow slaughter, something that was of little importance in the Sikh theology, Akalis changed all that. A Gurmukhi newspaper Akali, noted:

The question of cow protection is not as important for the Sikhs as it is for Hindus, because reverence for the cow is not enjoined by the Sikh religion. There exist 240 million Hindus who need no help from the Sikhs in regard to the question of cow protection. So long as the Hindus were a governed race the Sikhs helped them but it is now unwise for the latter to quarrel with another sister community to champion the cause of Hindus^{xv}.

In this way, Akalis not only used the issue to give good message to the Muslim community but also used it as an opportunity to assert their distinctness from the Hindus, by not supporting an essentially the Hindu cause. However, the issue remained important for the Hindus and the Muslims both. The tragic dimension added to it was the use of cow slaughter as a means to instigate Hindus. The incidents of throwing beef into Hindu temples aroused Hindu community all over the Punjab^{xvi}. *Zamindar*, a Muslim paper from the Punjab, noted that in 1924, the Hindus of six towns passed resolution against cow killing. With the collapse of the Khilafat Movement, the consensus, developed on the issue of cow protection also collapsed.

Conclusion

Human beings have always seen violence over difference of opinion whether religious, political or social but religious differences have always been more violent and frequent. India which homes to followers of many religions has seen hundreds of riots/clashes resulting from religious differences. One major reason for riots between Hindus and Muslims has always happened to be cow slaughtering. Since cow is worshiped by Hindus and its slaughter is obviously considered sacrilegious, they have always remained emotional to its protection. On the other hand Muslims' religion allows meat eating of some animals including cow, they consider its restriction interference in their religion. Due to religious attachment to this issue it has always remained thorny and difficult to resolve.

Islam is considered by its followers as a religion of peace and respect to other religions. If we, as Muslims, just follow one this basic principle of Islam, the issue could be resolved easily. Further Islam also teaches us to refrain from *fitna* and *fasad* (an act that results in violence and lawlessness). So it can be suggested that we should respect other's religious beliefs and avoid doing such things that might result in violence. However, wherever the Muslims are in majority then the other party should respect the Muslims' religious commandments. Thus following the give and take principle any issue can be resolved including the cow slaughtering.

Notes

- ⁱ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "Cow protection movement", (28 October 2008)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cow_protection_movement, January 5, 2009.
- ⁱⁱ Wikipeda, "Cow protection".
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hindu attitude on non-violence against animals was ironic, as they were prepared for violence against human beings, to achieve non-violence for animals.
- ^{iv} Although British were also meat eaters, but all the Hindu energies, to stop cow killing were directed against Muslims, while sparing British altogether on this issue.
- ^v *Punjab Chronicle*, January 19, 1918, NPP.
- ^{vi} *Ibid*.
- ^{vii} *Desh*, September 14, 1919, NPP.
- ^{viii} *Aftab*, December 12, 1919, NPP.
- ^{ix} It was twelfth session of AIML, held in Amritsar on Dec. 29-31, 1919. On the cow issue, 'Muslim League advised Musalmans of India on the occasion of *Bakr-id* festival, to substitute, as far as possible, the sacrifice of other animals in place of cows".
 [Source: A. M. Zaidi, ed., *Evolution of Muslim Political Thought—1917-1925* (Michiko & Panjathan), vol. 2, p.217.
- ^x *Tribune*, January 6, 1920, NPP.
- ^{xi} *Watan*, March, 26, 1920, NPP.
- ^{xii} *Vedia Magazine*, May, 1920 NPP.
- ^{xiii} *Liberal*, May, 25, 1921 & Punjab Press Abstracts. *Ibid*. p.210.
- ^{xiv} *Partab*, September 7, 1921, Punjab Press Abstract.
- ^{xv} *Akali*, Sep. 20 1925, note on the Punjab Press (1925).
- ^{xvi} *Sanat Samachar*, Nov. 3, 1925.

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