

## Of Cows, Muslims, and the Right to Religious Difference

Remembering Gandhi in an Era of Escalating Communal Violence in India  
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MK Gandhi, protection of the cow and eating beef...Notes after Dadri.

Gandhi Jayanti just went by, a national holiday in India, celebrating the birth anniversary of the man for long described as the “Father” of the nation. Never having been an unqualified Gandhi supporter, let alone Gandhian – despite admiring and respecting many aspects of his idiosyncratic, and charismatic personality, and reading with interest his acutely strategic politics – I don’t normally remember him on his anniversary. Nor am I one amongst a growing body of scholars adding new, and nuanced, insights to understanding the man, his ideas and his politics. Yet over the past three days I have spent time reading some Gandhi, and also the work of scholars who amongst other matters have written on one aspect of his thought/practice that keeps reverberating in my mind – that of *ahimsa* or non violence. You may ask why?

### Enemy of the Cow

Three days back a man was brutally lynched to death by a mob. Muhammad Akhlaq was Muslim; and the nameless mob – Hindu. The ostensible reason – a rumour that his family had defied the unwritten beef ban, and had the “sacred” meat in his fridge, waiting to be cooked. He lived in Dadri village barely 50 kms away from me, as did those who beat him brutally to death. The case that is now well known does not require great elaboration. Underneath the cacophony of voices that have since then variously justified, and protested, this brutality, the Hindutva stakes have been very clear. We are witnessing the return, with vengeance, of a symbol that has been saturated with easily a 150 years of meaning – that of the cow. An animal that had been sacrificed by the Brahmin ancestors of many of its present day protectors, it was rescued, resuscitated as the symbol of militant Hinduism, and later produced as the rallying ground for militant Hindutva nationalism. In the not terribly complex history of “cow protection” politics, the obvious enemy of the animal, and its self-styled custodians, were the Muslims – and the term *kasai*, butcher – which some were by profession became one of the derogatory metonyms to refer to the community in the Hindi speaking parts of north India.

What does Gandhi, an avowed vegetarian, and a supporter of cow protection have to do with any of this? Interestingly enough, quite a lot and importantly, his stances were counter to the aggressive positions of Hindutva militants of his (and our) times. Here, I reproduce just two of his responses (the first as early as 1917) to “cow protection” campaigns of groups like the Gaurakshini Sabha, and to later (by 1925) to the blatant communalization of the issue.

I am thankful to the Gaurakshini Sabha and to you all for inviting me to lay the foundation-stone of the *gaushala* in this town. For the Hindus, this is sacred work. Protection of the cow is a primary duty for every Indian. It has been my experience, however, that the way we set about this important work leaves much to be desired. I have given some thought to this serious problem and wish to place before you the conclusions I have formed. **We do not go the right way to work for protecting the cows against our Muslim brethren. The result has been that these two great communities of India are always at odds with each other and cherish mutual distrust. Occasionally, they even fight** [emphasis added].[\[i\]](#)

And again, in 1925, in *Young India*, he wrote:

Once, while in Champaran, I was asked to expound my views regarding cow-protection. I told my Champaran friends then that if anybody was really anxious to save the cow, he ought to once for all to disabuse his mind of the notion that he has to make the Christians and Mussalmans to desist from cow-killing. Unfortunately today we seem to believe that the problem of cow-protection consists merely in preventing non-Hindus, especially Mussalmans from beef-eating and cow-killing. That seems to me to be absurd. Let no one, however, conclude from this that I am indifferent when a non-Hindu kills a cow or that I can bear the practice of cow-killing. On the contrary, no one probably experiences a greater agony of the soul when a cow is killed. But what am I to do? Am I to fulfil my dharma myself or am I to get it fulfilled by proxy? Of what avail would be my preaching *brahmacharya* to others if I am at the same time steeped in vice myself? How can I ask Mussalmans to desist from eating beef when I eat it myself? **But supposing even that I myself do not kill the cow, is it any part of my duty to make the Mussalman, against his will, to do likewise? Mussalmans claim that Islam permits them to kill the cow. To make a Mussalman, therefore, to abstain from cow-killing under compulsion would amount in my opinion to converting him to Hinduism by force. Even in India under swaraj, in my opinion, it would be for a Hindu majority unwise and improper to coerce by legislation a Mussalman minority into submission to statutory prohibition of cow-**

**slaughter.** [emphasis added].[\[ii\]](#)

Gandhi was a religious man, and considered himself a good Hindu. This did not pose a contradiction for him in his engagement with, and indeed shaping, a rather unique and modern political mode that could bring within its frame, what are normally considered the highly differentiated domains of “religion” and the “secular”. In 1942, Gandhi wrote, “there are two things to which I am devoting my life - permanent unity between Hindus and Mohammedans, and *satyagraha*”[\[iii\]](#). And as early as 1915, he had said that *ahimsa* or non-violence brought together such values as *daya* (compassion); *akrodh* (abstinence from anger) and *aman* (peace).[\[iv\]](#) Religiously inspired, and bringing together the best in the different traditions of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, Gandhi’s non-violence was both addressing an individual’s moral conscience as it was to become a strategy of mass resistance. To him, being a good Hindu meant protection of life in all forms - human and animal. It also meant, more importantly, the ability to recognize - within a political domain - the importance of recognizing and respecting religious difference. Looking back, I see how important this Gandhian legacy of right to religious difference was as a corner-stone of early Nehruvian nationalism. Maintaining the space for, and right to, religious difference within a secular polity has been, and continues to be, one of the greatest struggles faced by India. As Nehru said,

In a country like India, which has many faiths and religions, no real nationalism can be built up except on the basis of secularity. Any narrower approach must exclude a section of the population and then nationalism itself will have a much more restricted meaning than it should possess..[\[v\]](#)

## **Protection of the Cow**

It is a well-known fact that should not require reiteration that Indian secularism, and its enshrinement and protection in the Indian Constitution, has meant the right and freedom of religion in all its aspects - from faith, to practice and propagation. In essence this means the right to live, pray, eat, dress and conduct one’s everyday life, if one so wished, according to the precepts of the religion of one’s birth, or choice. Indeed, the religious roots of the Gandhian objection to communalizing cow protection, and the Nehruvian strengthening of the right to live religiously inspired lives differently, and with dignity (and safety), were what made the modern Indian experiment challenging, yet commendable.

To those Hindus who are now screaming for the blood of beef eaters (read Muslims; it is irrelevant in this language of violent retribution whether large numbers of Hindus, Christians and other communities eat beef) I ask - which Hindu scripture, or bodies of faith practice, have sanctioned the taking of human life?

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To those Hindus who are not, yet do not fight this escalating communal hatred and violence I ask - how long are you going to let this happen, in your name? Because in not speaking you are as complicit as the Hindutva forces you may oppose in denying rights, social justice and equality to a substantial number of fellow citizens.

## Notes

[i] M. K. Gandhi, "Speech on Cow Protection", Bettiah, 1917.

[ii] M.K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 29.1.1925

[iii] *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XV

[iv] David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Times and Ours: The Global Legacy of His Ideas*

[v] Quoted in Sumit Chakravartty, "Nehru's Struggle for Secularism", *Mainstream*, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015.