

## **Id-Ul-Zuha and Slaughter of Animals**

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The Maharashtra government's proactive stance on banning slaughter of bulls and bullocks reveals that they are playing to the communal mindset of their voters and destroying the tolerant spirit of Indian democracy.

Now that the ban on slaughter of cattle is in place in Maharashtra it is incumbent on all citizens to follow the law. In this connection, a petition was filed in the Bombay High Court which held that banning the sale, purchase and consumption of beef contravenes the Fundamental Rights guaranteed by the Constitution to the minorities of India. The petitioners challenged the ban by invoking Article 21 of the Constitution—protection of life and personal liberty, and Article 29 which prohibits discrimination based on race, language, religion, culture and civilisation. The beef traders of Maharashtra had appealed to the Bombay High Court for relief following up on the petition.

The Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Bill, 1995, was passed by the President in February 2015 and the government has also notified it. Under this law, in addition to cows whose slaughter was already banned, bulls and bullocks were prohibited from slaughter.

### **Going Beyond One Community**

In India the debate continues whether the slaughter of cows, bulls and their progeny is correct or not. This is not an issue of any specific community—whether vegetarians or meat eaters. The meat of cows, bulls and buffaloes is widely recognised as a source of nutrition apart from poultry, goat and sheep, that is more readily available. The meat of bulls, inexpensive in comparison to goat and sheep, has often been the preferred food for a lot of people, particularly the poor; and this does not include only the Muslims. There are various groups of people who eat and are engaged in meat trade.

It needs to be remembered that India is the second largest exporter and the fifth largest consumer of beef in the world. Other than Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana have also

passed similar stringent laws on the slaughter of cattle. About eight lakh people have been rendered unemployed in Maharashtra alone as a consequence of this law.

Other than this, people involved in cooking and serving beef products, leather workers and traders as well as members of the Qureshi community have also been rendered unemployed. Dharavi in Mumbai is a major centre for leather work and trade; it is one of Asia's largest markets for leather belts, purses, wallets, bags etc which are all made from cattle hide and this has been badly affected by the ban.

According to Mohammad Ali Qureshi, the head of Mumbai's Beef Traders Association, "A large part of the leather supplied to factories in Chennai and Kolkata comes from Maharashtra." This ban would lead to a loss of about Rs 500 crore for those involved in various aspects of this industry.

## **Cattle Population Unsustainable**

Our Constitution guarantees equal treatment for all citizens. In most states of India there is no prohibition on the slaughter of bulls and bullocks. That renders this ban in Maharashtra as discriminatory.

Inflation is rampant; the prices of food items and other essential commodities are rising faster with each passing day. Even the farmers are facing distress. Before the ban, in Maharashtra there used to be 10,000 bulls and bullocks slaughtered every day. This implies that after this ban there is an addition of 3 lakh bulls and bullocks to the cattle population of Maharashtra every month.

Is this sustainable? Will we see a situation where cattle outnumber the people who can take care of them? A situation may arise where the cattle will die in the hundreds due to neglect and the inability of farmers to feed them. This will result in pollution and distress. The adverse consequences would extend to the economy, society and environment.

If the President had considered these aspects before signing the Bill into law, a better solution would be found for all.

## **Acting Against Id-ul-Zuha**

The ban on bull and bullock slaughter is a continuing issue, but Id-ul-zuha, popularly known as Bakri-id or the Id of Sacrifice comes only once a year and is an auspicious occasion. In previous years, there have been many reports of vehicles transporting cattle being stopped and harassed which caused lots of difficulties to the traders as well as Muslims. In the recent past, police complaints were lodged on this point and even the Bombay High Court was approached for relief. This matter continued in courts for the last four years without any decision and this promptness to prohibit bull and bullock slaughter seems to be politically motivated. This has caused a lot of resentment among Muslims. Other minorities

may also be feeling aggrieved as they have been denied an inexpensive source of food, a democratic right.

There had been a marked reduction in the number of harassments in the last four years faced by Muslims and cattle traders during Id. But this year we have a new law which prohibits the slaughter of all cattle. This would mean that there would be a sharp rise in the prices of sheep, goat and buffalo in the run up to Bakri-id.

Sacrifice is not just a ritual which has been enjoined by religion. Muslims consider it to be a sign of worship. In a democracy, people have a right to not just freedom of religion but also freedom to pursue their livelihood, way of life, trade and employment. But the question which arises for believing Muslims is—in a country where the slaughter of certain animals is banned, would the sacrifice of those animals by breaking the law be an acceptable offering to God?

For three days prior to Eid, butchers get extra work, poor people get food, various groups trading in bones, animal hides get extra earnings. Given these considerations and that sacrifice is an important part of the religion of Muslims, it has to be seen whether the government will relax the ban for three days.

## **Playing to Communal Votebank**

Many have said that this stringent prohibition on cow slaughter is political gamesmanship and playing to the galleries. Yet it has had a severe impact on the livelihood, food and now religious practices of one particular community, contravening their fundamental rights. It would have been preferable if the government had not played politics on this matter and considered all aspects.

It also needs to be acknowledged that the order of nature is such that despite organised sacrifices of this sort the population of goats, sheep and cattle has continued to rise over the past many decades. A sudden ban on their slaughter would also lead to a sharp rise in the requirements of fodder and overall would mean a disruption in the ecology of animal husbandry. Thus it can be argued that the slaughter of animals has a role in the larger ecology of food production and consumption. A sudden artificial ban like the present law would lead to an over-population of cattle, shortage of fodder, scarcity of food and serve no purpose other than the political ends of some groups. The manner in which the slaughter of cattle is being used to polarise people on communal lines does not speak well for democracy.

For many poor Muslims, purchasing an old bullock beyond its productive years has often been a way to follow the rules of Id-ul-Zuha. This is because one bullock is seen as an equivalent to seven goats or sheep. Buying old bullocks is cheaper than goats and sheep. Now this source has been stopped. This should not be made into a communal issue. For the last few years, Muslims had been asking for temporary slaughter houses, and temporary

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transport vehicles for bullocks for the Id-ul-Zuha sacrifice, but now with the passage of this new law, all these demands have been rendered irrelevant. It seems the government is following verbatim this common saying in Hindi—*Na rahega bans na bajegi bansoori* (Destroy the bamboo, the music of the flute would have to stop).