

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Religion and Society: Of Hindu Extremists, Cows, and Muslims

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

Recent tensions over beef production and eating have seen bans enforced and murder taking place in India. It is linked to a rise in Hindu extremism, but Hindu concepts of tolerance and non-violence indicate another path.

Commentary

HINDUS REVERE the cow, most particularly a subgenus commonly found in India marked by its humped back. For many its primary association is with Krishna as cowherd, while as the “vehicle” (sacred animal) of the God Shiva it is prominent in Hindu iconography. Exactly when the cow attained its revered status is not clear, with scholars believing that the early Vedic civilisation conducted cow and other animal sacrifices.

However, during the period that Buddhism and Jainism arose (circa C5th BCE) the concept of ahimsa, “non-harm”, became prominent and probably triggered a revolt against animal sacrifice which remains the norm across Hinduism. While the cow is sacred, most Hindu commentators assert that they do not worship it. Rather it is venerated because of its symbolic qualities along with other animals, including monkeys especially the langur associated with Hanuman.

The cow and identity

However, the cow has become a very central and prominent symbol, and its long association with farming and dairy production have no doubt contributed to its status. Despite this, the distinctive Indian cow is becoming rarer as it has been cross bred to create a more productive farming unit. This has certainly been an issue raised by

some Hindu leaders, but Hindu farmers have not responded favourably given the economic benefits. Nevertheless, the cow remains revered, as anyone who has ever encountered one on an Indian road or in a temple will know.

Historically the cow signified difference. With the coming of Muslims to India, food practices were a clear distinguishing marker between Hindus and Muslims: the former not eating beef, the latter not eating pork. In colonial times, especially under the British, the new rulers were sometimes explicitly called beef eaters. Indeed, one aspect of conversion to Christianity during this period might be the act of eating beef as a symbolic sign of leaving behind the old tradition. It should be noted that many Dalits, the traditional “untouchables” or “outcasts” of India, have also traditionally eaten beef and have farmed cattle for leather. For high caste Hindus, this helped defined them as impure.

Devotional attitudes towards the cow have also been seen in the Hindu diaspora, with some Hindu centres in the West running cow sanctuaries. Some years back, in the United Kingdom, a case went to the High Court when a Hindu community whose bull – named Shambu – was diagnosed with bovine TB fought unsuccessfully to prevent having him put down as a legally enforced preventative measure. These attitudes mark communal distinctions with the surrounding secular culture.

Cows, extremism, and legislation

For centuries, the cow has played a part in defining Hindu identity against the Other but recent years have seen it becoming increasingly prominent as part of the ideology of Hindutva, or right wing Hindu nationalist politics. Sensitivities on this are growing, with recent news reports highlighting the case of a Muslim killed by an angry mob who believed that he had eaten beef. The 50-year-old man, Mohammad Akhlaq, was dragged from his house by a mob of over one hundred people. He died in hospital from his wounds, while his son was seriously injured. However, this is not the only incident.

As a secular nation, many argue that reverence for the cow should not feature in Indian legislation, however, laws to ban cattle slaughter and prohibit beef eating have existed for decades. Since Narendra Modi became prime minister last year, there have been increasing demands for these with Maharashtra issuing a ban earlier this year, followed by Haryana. Indeed one BJP MP, Sakshi Maharaj, has called for legislation to make cow slaughter a capital offence.

For farmers and those who rely on the trade (predominantly Muslims, Christians, and Dalits) in the states affected by bans it is likely to lead to economic hardship. Under such circumstances hard-line divisions and social tensions between communities are likely to be reinforced. Political moderation is unlikely: Modi has shown no signs of speaking out or acting on this or other communal tensions, and indeed when, a state governor, many critics lamented his silence and inaction on some of the worst inter-communal riots ever seen in India.

As such, the symbol of the cow is likely to become an increasing rallying call for Hindu extremists and militants in a growing cycle of identity politics, communal

conflict, and tensions. Indeed, reports suggest that Hindu extremists have vowed further action and violence.

Meditating tensions

There is a danger of such conflicts escalating within India and elsewhere, especially aggravating grievances between Hindus and Muslims, but also potentially with Christians and Dalits. Hindu and other community leaders, as well as governments, may need to mediate between these groups. Hindu leaders can educate their people that the current Hindu extremist standpoint, including Indian government legislation, is not representative of their tradition.

Rather a more moderate live and let live approach must prevail, which is embedded in the long Hindu tradition of tolerance for the other. Indeed, if Hindus believe *ahimsa* means they should not eat cows, it should also suggest they should not murder humans even if they infringe certain religious sensibilities. Meanwhile, other communities should not play up to the Hindu extremists by focusing upon beef eating as a symbol of opposition or antagonism as has happened historically.

Legislation on cattle slaughter and beef eating seem out of place within secular countries, yet there needs also to be an awareness and sensitivity towards Hindu beliefs on this matter which governments with significant Hindu populations need to acknowledge.

Paul Hedges is Associate Professor in Interreligious Studies for the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He maintains a blog on Interreligious Studies and related issues at: www.logosdao.wordpress.com.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg