



‘Cow’ Politics in the history of Kerala: an analysis.

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Abstract.

The rituals and traditions surrounding cow appeared in Kerala only after the coming of the Brahmans. There were certain archaeological references of gifting cows in medieval Kerala. Under the directions of Brahmins the rulers took care of protecting cows. Foreign writers, who visited during medieval period in Kerala, also noticed the respect given to the cow by King and Brahmins. On the other hand majority of the people belong to Non Brahmin communities were attracted to this kind of cow worship. The paper addresses historical facts of those who see cow as divine and those who do not.

Keywords.

Cow, foreign notices, Hindu worship, lower castes, Malabar, Brahmins.

Hindu Nationalism centred on ‘cow’ politics have now entered a terrifying dimension. The Gujarat state government is now on its way to penalize the consumption of cow meat with a life sentence. Another Chief minister wants a death sentence to be meted out for the same offense. Rajasthan High Court has remarked that the cow can be made the national animal of India. Throughout the country, the killing of cows, camels, buffalos and bulls for



their meat has been banned. This attempt to use the cow as a symbol of Hindu-Brahminic purity as part of employing their Savarna Hindu philosophies politically has evolved by drawing references from historical sources. References to cow meat and protection of cows can be found in some Brahminic texts dating from the Middle Ages and Ancient India. T.N Jha states that the worship of cows has become symbolic of Savarna Hindutva. From the moderate Hindutva in Gandhian politics to the radical Hinduism of Sangh Parivar, we have now emerged to an era where the cow has become the symbol of a modern fascist ideology.

The political ideology and Brahminic concepts represented by the symbolic use of cows have been advancing its strains of influence in Malabar. In Malabar, the symbol of cow, which Sangh Parivar is attempting to sell as a symbol of Hinduism, is being propagated with its adjunct philosophies of Brahminic thought. As in other places, the symbolic use of the cow in Malabar is tied to attempts to establish upper caste hegemony and Brahminic ideology in society.

There are several proofs that Brahmins in Kerala used to consume cow meat during the older times. A. Sreedhara Menon says that Brahmins used to consume cow meat during the Sangha period. V.V.K Valath who translated Tamil Sangha books points out that a race called Maravars used to sacrifice cows to a deity residing under the banyan tree and then consume the remaining meat. S. Ayyankar says that Brahmins across South India used to consume beef and pork¹. According to T.N. Jha, the orders published during this period to ban cow meat are indicative that it was a widely practiced tradition and that there were attempts to put an end to this. There were similar bans in Kerala during this period.

In Kerala, rituals surrounding cows began to appear after Brahminic rituals gained prominence. Nagas, Garuda, buffalos, cows etc were revered in Kerala.² Buchanan refers to Brahmin women without children offering young buffalos to temples. Buchanan writes that



these young buffalos were revered by the populace and that they had the freedom to roam wherever they liked.³There are some stone carvings in Kerala referring to cows. Near TirnelliChepped, one wishes for peace to befall on Brahmins and cows in their eternal sleep. One in the NedumburamTali temple has instructions on gifting cows to the rulers of the land. One in Tiruvadaikattu also references are to how cows are to be given away as alms⁴. Except few references such as these, there are no references that claim the cow to be a sacred animal in any of these inscriptions. The boar had more importance in the rituals of upper caste Hindus before. Since 'Varaha', or the boar an avatar of Vishnu, the symbol of the boar appears in several temples. Places like Panniyur, Pannikottiri etc got their names because there were Vishnu temples there. Panniyur is a prominent Brahmin centre that worships the boar as a symbol of their race.

Shanakarasmrithi, a work that can be considered as the *Manusmrithi* of Kerala, has several references to the cow. A section that refers to the qualities of a good king says that a ruler who protects Brahmins and cows would not be reviled by anyone. The book also says that the capital of the state must be built in a place with ample grazing grounds for cows. There is a detailed description of the process of making 'bhasma' in the book. "A cow of good breeding is selected, tied to a stable and fed well. On a Chaturdashi day, wearing white clothes, the person in charge utters the 'karukamathra' to the cow. The next day, take all the necessary materials to the cow. Make the cow stand on its legs and collect its urine in a utensil made of one of these materials- gold, silver, bronze or clay. Before the dung touches the ground, that too is collected. The dung and the urine are mixed, dried and stored in the above utensil itself. Later, vetiver, sandalwood, camphor and saffron are added to the mixture and stored in a dry space." The importance vested on this 'bhasma', made from cow dung and urine, reveals the importance given to cows by Brahmins. (*Shankkarasmrithi* says that the



‘bhasma’ used by Shudras/ Nairs should be from Brahmins. This highlights that the cow is worshipped primarily by the Brahmins.)

Foreign travellers have noted several such practices in Kerala. Friar Odoric who travelled to Kerala in the 14th wrote that the urine and dung of cows were considered sacred. Odoric says that dung was collected in silver or gold vessels and that everyone- from the commoners to the king and the queen would apply it on their bodies as a mode to purify themselves.

Marcopolo wrote that even though buffalos were not usually butchered, some communities would consume beef after the natural death of the animal. Ma Huan who travelled to Malabar in the 15th century writes.⁵ “Kings and commoners do not consume beef; Muslims do not consume pork.” Since the reference is to ‘common’ people, chances are that it excludes the lower caste and ⁶the slaves. Buchanan who travelled to Malabar in the 19th century as a surveyor for the British writes that Parayas were considered impure like the Muslims and Christians because they consumed the meat of cows.⁷ Reading into the 13th century text *Unniyachicharitam*, Dr N. Gopinathan writes that the reference to ‘paythiniparayi’ might be to a Parayi who consumes beef. Ma Huan notes of an incident where a Muslim issues a statement to the king, “you do not eat beef; we do not eat pork. Thus, we respect each other’s customs.” Ma Huan notes that this custom was continued even during his time. He also wrote that the king would burn cow dung and apply the ashes to his forehead. Buchanan wrote that fisherfolk would consume any kind of meat except for beef.

One of the first agreements made between Vasco da Gama and the Kochi king was that cows will not be butchered. Gama handed over three Mappilas who carried cow meat with them and the king promptly hanged them to death. This reveals that there have been killings in the name of protecting the cows in the history of Kerala. There was a similar



agreement between the Kollam queen and the Portuguese.⁸ Citing Bishop Bartholomew, Rev. Samuel Mateer writes that 5 people were hanged on a tree near Ambalapuzha for killing a cow. Logan writes that the killing of a cow was among the five major crimes in Kerala. It is believed that similar laws existed during Logn's time. During the reign of the Kozhikode Samudiri, butchering a cow was enough grounds for capital punishment.

People used to believe that it was good luck to see the cow's backside in the morning.⁹ T.K. Gopala Panikker writes that people used to believe that it was good fortune to see cows, buffalos or gold in the start of a New Year. However, it was believed that the mouth of the cow is impure. Kings would set up stables and vessels containing water for cows¹⁰. It is said that Malayalis loved at least one dairy product with their daily meal. We have to assume that this refers to people from the upper caste. The lower classes did not have the right to feed, look after, or milk cows. When a cow gave birth, rituals similar to when an Antharjanam would give birth were observed.¹¹

"The cow is a major deity for the Hindus. From their birth to death, for ritualistic, material and spiritual purposes, some product from the cow is necessary. If there is no dairy product with the meal, it is difficult. Even in sickness, Hindus need products from cows." This is the opening line from the 1911 publication *GorakshaUpadesham*(translated to 'instructions regarding the protection of cows') printed from Malayalamukham Press in Alappuzha. The words were translated by the Goraksha Sabha (Association for the protection of cows) president Gelarayasi. This book was part of the several attempts in Kerala for the protection of the animal. 4000 copies were published at the time.¹² The book explains that its aim of publication is to raise awareness among the people that the killing of cows is a great offense. It also included details of the various laws established by different rulers to prevent the killing of cows. The book portrays communities like Chakkiliyans and Chemmanars as



lowly for their practice of killing cows, buffalos and other useful animals. This book can be seen as an attempt to encourage the growth of Hindutva under the banner of cow vigilantism.

The state of affairs discussed above makes one thing clear- the communalism that can be propagated by dividing the society into two binaries- those who consume beef v/s those who do not. The references made above also make it clear that communities like Parayars are clearly outside of the boundaries of Hindutva. Muslims and Christians are also differentiated on the basis of their food habits. The cow was revered only by a limited fraction of the population- the ruling class and some Brahmins. The majority of the population- including the lower caste Hindus, Muslims and Christians did not hold cows in such a huge esteem. The importance vested on the cow is thus part of the emerging upper class Hindu consciousness in society.

After Independence, the Sangh Parivar held several campaigns in Kerala for the protection of cows. In 1952, the R.S.S. called for a cow-protection day which was celebrated in Palakkad, Chavakkad, Shornur, Payyoli etc. In places like Payyoli, this led to clashes. There were protests against a meeting held to discuss the issue of killing cows. Some felt that this was against their rituals and traditions. In protest, they killed a young buffalo and distributed its meat. This clash ended in the death of a person. Sangh Parivar held a protest the very next day. K. Kelappan was present during the meeting. K. Kelappan, designated as 'Kerala Gandhi' participated in prominently two Hindu issues after Independence. One was an issue in Angadipuram temple. (There was a huge campaign for this issue by the Sangh Parivar organizations in Malabar.) The second was the issue in Payyoli related to the protection of cows. Getting a person like Kelappan on their side was a chance for Sangh Parivar to earn some political points. (The fact that even Gandhi had raised his voice on this issue later provided great mileage to Hindu organizations. BJP M.P Sakshi Maharaj recently



declared that the law to protect cows was implemented not as part of the R.S.S. agenda but as part of implementing Gandhi's vision. In October 1953, a meeting was organized under the leadership of Arya Samaj to discuss the issue of cow protection. R.S.S. also conducted a demonstration for the same issue. On 1st November of the same year, Malabar GosamrakshanaSamiti was formed under the leadership of Sri T.N. Tirumumb at Chalapuram in Kozhikode.) A meeting was also organized in Kozhikode during November. Similar campaigns did not occur in Kozhikode for a long time.

In the formation of a Kerala cultural identity, colonial attitudes have a prominent part along with Semitic religions. In the attempts to re-establish the backward feudal traditions before the establishment of Kerala modernity, the cultural significance of cuisine, rituals and festivals are often weaponized. Sangh Parivar's politics centred around the cow did not take root in Kerala because the majority of the population- Muslims, Christians, and non-Brahmin Hindus are consumers of beef. Cow-protection agenda can be seen as an attempt to impose the ideals of Brahmins, who comprise less than 5% of the total population on the rest of Malayalees. Even though the rulers used to impose strict adherence to these ideals, we understand that the majority of the population have maintained authentic food habits pertaining to their community. Some studies observe that the need for protecting cows came from a non-religious basis. Some argue that it was for the benefit of the farmers and to maintain herds of cows intact. The usual practise was to sell aged cows to some market place or buyer and purchase a young cow in its place. In Kerala, the practise of abandoning aged cows did not exist. They were usually bought by beef-consumers. There are no records to show that aged cows were abandoned in the roadside after they have exhausted their usefulness. Even today, the upper caste in Kerala do not abstain from selling their old cows once they stop producing milk, in the name of cow protection. The best route to stifling



diverse voices and establishing a one-dimensional Hindu nationalism is the projection of spiritual symbols like the cow. What we see today are attempts to establish Brahminic hegemony by attracting the diverse Hindu population towards stirring religious symbols.



¹IlamkulamKunjupillai, *KeralthilelruladanjaEdukai*, National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1957, pg. 164

²NagamAyya, *Travancore State Manual*

³Francis Buckanan, *op.cit.*33

⁴Putusseri Ramachandran, *KeralacharithrathinteAdisthanarekakai*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 2007, pg. 114

⁵L.F. Benedetto (Translator), *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1994, pg. 298

⁶ C.K. Kareem (Translator), *Francis BuckananteKeralam*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1996, pg. 153

⁷*Ibid*, pg. 191

⁸P. BhaskaranUnni, *op.cit*, pg.38

⁹*Ibid*.

¹⁰P. BhaskaranUnni, *PathombathamNoottandileKeralam*, Kerala Sahitya Academy, Thrissur, 2012, pg. 393

¹¹P. Bhaskaran Unni, *Ibid*, pg. 41

¹²(<http://shijualex.in>)