

YAKS, COWS AND STATUS IN THE HIMALAYAS

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The special position of the cow in Hindu religion and society is well known. The symbolic connotations of the cow are varied and complicated. Even so, whatever specific meanings and values pertain within the religious traditions themselves, it is a more general sense of the sacred and inviolable nature of the cow which functions in everyday life. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the impact that this phenomenon, the sacred cow, has had upon non-Hindus living within the boundaries and along the peripheries of Hindu societies.

In Section 1, the nature of cultural stereotypes accruing to non-Hindus, their characterization as "beef-eaters", will be discussed by means of examples taken from anthropological literature. This will be followed in Section 2 by a description of the laws (former and current) which protect cattle in the Hindu Kingdom of Nepal; of past difficulties in applying these to non-Hindus, and of the implicit ambiguity of the old legal code in regard to the traditional customs of various local communities. Section 3 will illustrate some of the ways in which the low-status connotations of beef-eating have been adopted by the non-Hindus in their own self-representations.

1. The mountainous regions of northern India and Nepal have often been referred to as a "cultural interface." These areas constitute not only a geographical and ecological transition, but also a cultural transition between two zones: the Hindu lowlands and the high plateaus of Buddhist and Muslim Central Asia.

Although not all Hindus are vegetarians, Hindu vegetarianism represents one end of a spectrum and the meat-rich diet of the Central Asian nomads represents the opposite ecological and cultural extreme. The lowland cow cannot survive on the barren and windswept slopes of the bitter-cold mountain regions to the north, but there are related species: the tiny mountain cow (Nep.: "lulu"), the yak (Nep.: "cauri gai"), and the yak-cattle crossbreeds (Nep.: "dzo-ba").

In the societies of the mountainous belt across north India and Nepal, Tibetan Buddhist and Hindu cultural traits are generally found in some combination, with a tendency towards Hindu features

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in the lower-lying areas and Tibetan features in the higher and more northern areas. Various local groups have made conscious attempts to establish identity with one or the other of these broad culture areas, for economic and status-connected reasons. In this century the attempts have tended mainly in the direction of Hindu culture.

In most multi-ethnic areas cultural stereotypes are created. The Himalayan interface is no exception. A particularly pervasive one here is that of the "dirty beef-eating Bhotia."¹ The overt basis of this unflattering characterization is the simple fact that the cow is not considered sacred and is therefore often considered edible by non-Hindus.

For example, Srivastava reports that the Hindus of the Kumaon hills refrained from trading directly with Tibet for fear of being compelled to violate their own commensal restrictions:

"As Hindus they would not dream of eating with the 'filthy beef-eating' Tibetan Dogpa traders or drink from the same cup with them a beverage which invariably has a piece or two of meat thrown in. The meat could be a sheep or a yak cow!"²

Srivastava describes a particular group of people, the Johari Bhotias, who have attained considerable economic and political status in Kumaon:

"... the one irreconcilable incompatibility in their case is their being suspected of being beef-eaters or interdining with beef-eaters."³

It is not surprising that some communities in the Himalayan interface area are preoccupied with differentiating themselves from the "dirty beef-eaters" vis-a-vis their orthodox Hindu neighbours. A frequently cited example of this preoccupation is the case of the Thakalis of the Kali Gandaki Valley in north-central Nepal:

"Their Buddhist faith as well as their style of dress and manner of living stamped them at once as 'Bhote' and so pronounced was the contempt of the high-caste Hindus of the Nepalese ruling class for beef-eating and 'unclean' Tibetans and other Bhotes (e.g. Sherpas and Tamangs) that the Thakalis, however wealthy, could not establish satisfactory social relations with the dominant classes of Nepalese society ... they had to shed those habits which inevitably depressed their status in the estimation of those in whose society they wanted to be accepted. One of these was the eating of yak-meat which in Hindu eyes counts as beef, and is hence polluting

to all except the lowest and most despised castes. It is said that the customs contractor Harkaman Subba Sherchan (1860-1905) initiated the banning of yak-meat from the kitchens of the Thakalis ..."⁴

This account has been corroborated by various other writers.⁵ My own observations, however, lead me to conclude that this change in eating habits among the Thakalis is not nearly so pervasive as these writers claim. On the contrary, the renouncing of yak-eating, lamaistic Buddhism, etc., seems to have been confined to a relatively small, modern segment of the population. Many of these families have emigrated from Thak Khola.

Even so, the fact remains that such a reform was perceived by some as advantageous. Perhaps the statistical incidence of individuals who gave up eating yak-meat is less significant than the fact that the need for such a measure was perceived, that it was actually attempted, and that it was accepted as a "fait accompli" by so many social scientists who documented it.

A more subtle phenomenon, which lacks the aura of social reform, is the drawing of conceptual distinctions between yak and cow by people for whom the cow has no religious significance whatsoever. This occurs in Baragaon, to the north of Thak Khola, and in the yak-eating Thakali villages. Most people claim that although they do consume yak, mountain cows and yak-cattle crossbreeds are strictly prohibited. There is no indigenous belief, in Baragaon at least, that any of these animals are inherently sacred or polluting. The most likely explanation, therefore, is that beef is avoided for fear that the status conferred upon this group by the Hindus would plunge to an even lower level than that normally accruing to "yak-eating Bhotias."

II. There is no clear statement in the Nepalese legal code as to whether the yak is essentially the same or different in species to the cow. The cow of course is considered sacred and is therefore protected by law. Even nowadays the punishments for offenses against cattle are quite severe. According to the current version of the legal code the punishment for intentional killing of a cow, ox, or bull is twelve years imprisonment. For less serious offenses such as injuring or aiding to kill, the punishments are correspondingly less. Punishment for killing a yak is a mere Rs. 40 (approximately \$3.50) fine. This is particularly low considering that the market value of a mature yak is Rs. 1,600 or more. Even the Rs. 40 fine is not ordinarily imposed.

Given the huge disparity between the legal punishments for killing cows and yaks, one could deduce that according to Nepalese law, a yak is not classified as a type of cow. On the other hand,

since the yak is given special legal protection beyond that given to domesticated animals in general, one might deduce that the yak is considered to have some distant relationship to the cow, which other animals (e.g., the water buffalo) do not.

According to Sharma, the ban on cow killing was strongly enforced early in the nineteenth century, soon after the Shah dynasty came to power in Nepal. This is described by Sharma as part of a general strengthening of Hindu orthodoxy.⁶ Even so, Regmi reports that during the second half of the nineteenth century beef consumption was common in some of the non-Hindu hill regions of Nepal. When officials were sent from Kathmandu to Solukhumbu and Chankhu in 1862 A.D. to enforce the ban against cow killing, they reported the following:

"In case persons guilty of this crime are punished with death or enslavement, most of the inhabitants of these areas will have to be killed or enslaved. Accordingly, the heaviest possible fines should be imposed on persons who committed cow slaughter after these areas came under our rule, as long as they have wives, sons, daughters and bondsmen available for sale. Those who committed this crime after Falgun 1860 should be either beheaded or enslaved."⁷

Regmi adds that the slaughter of yaks in this area was permitted by the government.⁸

In another case cited by Regmi, a Damai (untouchable tailor) was sentenced to death by torture in 1862 A.D. for killing a cow. The authorities were ordered to "cut flesh from his back, apply condensed citrus juice mixed with salt (on the wounds), force him to eat (the flesh) himself, and thus kill him."⁹

Yak killing was considered a punishable offense at least as early as 1910, but the punishment in comparison with the punishment for cow killing was relatively light. For instance, in 1910 two Bhotia families from Humla (northwest Nepal) were fleeing southward because of an epidemic. They had run out of food grains and so killed and ate, one by one, three yak calves which they had brought along with them. Each person was fined Rs. 2.¹⁰

Scholars have pointed out two principles which run throughout the Nepalese legal code. One principle is that of preservation of and non-interference with traditional custom as it operates in regulating the internal affairs of various ethnic communities.¹¹ The second is that of preserving and upholding "certain high Hindu value symbols throughout the kingdom." Paramount among these symbols is the sacred cow, which is protected by law.¹²

There is obviously a certain amount of contradiction between these two principles in the case of the Bhotia groups of Nepal for whom yak-eating is a traditional custom. Indeed, this custom was implicitly recognized and disparaged in the code itself.

"The Bhotias had a very low position in the caste-framework proposed by the code. In fact one sees contemptuous references to the Bhotiya people everywhere in the code, unlike other 'Matawali' castes. The punishment for committing state offenses of certain category awarded to the Matawali castes was to lower them to the Bhote caste (Code 42:1, p. 212). Such a low estimation of the Bhotiya people undoubtedly springs from the common habit of all Bhotiya groups in Nepal of eating yak meat."¹³

III. Bhotias themselves are generally quite aware of the connection made by Hindus between meat-eating and status. In at least one area the notion of killing and consuming various kinds of animals is used to explain the origins of a caste-like system of ranking within the Bhotiya community. The following myth is recounted in Baragaon.¹⁴

'In the old days there was no caste system. Each person claimed to be higher than the next and as a result there were many arguments. So the people went to a respected lama and asked who should be considered high and who should be considered low. He told them: "Go to the forest and search for meat. Bring back whatever meat you are able to find." So they all went out to the forest. The man who brought back sheep was called "Hrewo." This was the highest caste. The one who brought goat became second in rank. He was called "Lamichen." A man who brought yak meat was given the third-ranking name: "Phalwa." The next brought dzo-ba. He was called "Mendik." The rest brought cow and dog meat. They became out-castes and were called "Ringin".'

In this short myth there is nothing to indicate recognition of the cow's sacred status. On the contrary, cow is classified along with dog in regard to its meat. The principle illustrated in the myth is that of the low status of beef-eaters; not the high status of cows.

In another, very different myth the upper-most status group in Baragaon, perhaps in imitation of the Thakalis, claims high-caste Hindu origins. In an attempt to create plausibility, the adoption of yak-meat eating by this group is also explained. The story is summarized as follows:

'In the time when eighty-four rajas ruled in Nepal, the people of Baragaon fell under the control of two different rajas. One ruled from Lo Mantang in the north and one from Thini in the south. This double subjection was a strain so the people sent a delegation to the Thakuri raja in Jumla and invited him to rule in Baragaon. A delegate came from Jumla and ascertained from the Lo Mantang and Thini rajas that each would hand over control of Baragaon to the Jumla raja if the other would. So the grandson of the Jumla raja arrived and bought the old palace in Kagbeni from the Lo Mantang raja and began to live there and rule the area. His name was Birgung raja. He and his family were high-caste Hindu Thakuris. At first they brought wives of their own caste from the south. Later one of Birgung's descendants, during a campaign to unite the area politically, married the daughter of the raja of Lo Mantang. It was at that time that the family began to follow the Buddhist religion. Before that they had never eaten yak-meat or drunk beer or distilled liquor. After receiving the daughter of the Lo Mantang raja they also began to eat yak-meat and drink chang and arak. Then in the time of Chandra Shamsheer Maharaj, a communication came from Kathmandu ordering the descendants of Birgung raja that they should either refrain from eating yak-meat and drinking alcohol, or they should give up their sacred threads and become like the local people. So the descendants of Birgung replied: "'hajur sarkar' we are living in a cold place. It is impossible for us not to eat and drink these things." And so it was at that time that Birgun's family gave up wearing the sacred threads.'

While the Buddhist religion is mentioned once in this account, it appears that yak-meat and alcoholic drinks are the real things that cut off the Baragaon Thakuris from their legendary high-caste origins. The historical foundations of the account may be dubious, but the concept that it reveals is interesting: that the difference between Bhotias and high-caste Hindus lies in the consumption or non-consumption of yak-meat and alcoholic drinks. Ironically enough, this is very similar to what the Hindus themselves express in the cultural stereotypes that they impose upon the Bhotias.

Although the sacredness of the cow is primarily a religious and secondarily a legal proposition, its primary meaning for non-Hindus is in relation to status and ethnic identity. Unlike Muslims and Christians, Hindus have never subscribed to 'conversion by the sword.' Similarly, as was pointed out earlier, the Nepalese

legal code allows a certain freedom to local communities to govern their own internal affairs according to their own traditions. Thus, the fact of belonging to a Hindu kingdom and being subject to its laws has not induced the Nepalese Bhotias to abandon their own customs and traditions.

This is not to minimize the importance of status. The Bhotias, like anyone else, are concerned with raising their status in the eyes of others. But without the economic means, or more important still, the economic motivation to bring about such a major change in lifestyle as removing yak-meat from their diet, they are not likely to do so.

Footnotes

1. Following popular usage I will use the term "Bhotia" to refer to those inhabitants of the Himalayan belt, south of Tibet itself, whose cultural patterns are primarily Tibetan.
2. Srivastava, 1966, p. 181.
3. Srivastava, 1966, p. 196.
4. Furer-Haimendorf, 1966, pp. 144-5.
5. e.g., Ijima, 1963, pp. 48-52; Manzardo, 1975, p. 27; Sharma, 1977, pp. 296-7.
6. Sharma, 1977, p. 278, F.N.
7. Regulations on Ban on Cow Slaughter in Solukhumbu. Marga Badi 9, 1862. (6/662). See Regmi, 1969, p. 15.
8. Regmi, 1969, p. 15.
9. Order Regarding Punishment of Damai for Cow Slaughter. Chaitra Badi 9, 1862 (6/748). See Regmi, 1969, p. 15.
10. Regmi, 1972, pp. 193-4.
11. Regmi, 1975, p. 110 and Sharma, 1977, pp. 284-5.
12. Sharma, 1977, p. 285.
13. Sharma, 1977, p. 297. The contemptuous references towards Bhotias were removed from the code in the 1963 edition, of the legal code, which put an end to caste discrimination in the administration of the law. See Sharma, 1977, pp. 277-8, F.N.

14. Paraphrased from a translation by Krishna Lal Thakali.

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