

CHAPTER XII

WHY DID NON-BRAHMINS GIVE UP BEEF-EATING?

THE food habits of the different classes of Hindus have been as fixed and stratified as their cults. Just as Hindus can be classified on their basis of their cults so also they can be classified on the basis of their habits of food. On the basis of their cults, Hindus are either *Saivites* (followers of Siva) or *Vaishnavites* (followers of Vishnu). Similarly, Hindus are either *Mansahari* (those who eat flesh) or *Shakahari* (those who are vegetarians).

For ordinary purposes the division of Hindus into two classes *Mansahari* and *Shakahari* may be enough. But it must be admitted that it is not exhaustive and does not take account of all the classes which exist in Hindu society. For an exhaustive classification, the class of Hindus called *Mansahari* shall have to be further divided into two sub-classes : (i) Those who eat flesh but do not eat cow's flesh; and (ii) Those who eat flesh including cow's flesh; In other words, on the basis of food taboos, Hindu society falls into three classes : (i) Those who are vegetarians; (ii) Those who eat flesh but do not eat cow's flesh; and (iii) Those who eat flesh including cow's flesh. Corresponding to this classification, we have in Hindu society three classes : (1) Brahmins; (2) Non-Brahmins; and (3) The Untouchables. This division though not in accord with the fourfold division of society called Chaturvarnya, yet it is in accord with facts as they exist. For, in the Brahmins¹ we have a class which is vegetarian, in the non-Brahmins the class which eats flesh but does not eat cow's flesh and in the Untouchables a class which eats flesh including cow's flesh.

This threefold division is therefore substantial and is in accord with facts. Anyone who stops to turn over this classification in his mind

¹ The Brahmins of India fall into two divisions (1) Pancha Dravid and (2) Panch Gauda. The former are vegetarians, the latter are not.

is bound to be struck by the position of the Non-Brahmins. One can quite understand vegetarianism. One can quite understand meat-eating. But it is difficult to understand why a person who is a flesh-eater should object to one kind of flesh namely cow's flesh. This is an anomaly which call for explanation. Why did the Non-Brahmin give up beef-eating? For this purpose it is necessary to examine laws on the subject. The relevant legislation must be found either in the Law of Asoka or the Law of Manu.

II

To begin with Asoka. The edicts of Asoka which have reference to this matter are Rock Edict No.I and Pillar Edict Nos.II and V. Rock Edict No.I reads as follows :-

“This pious Edict has been written by command of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King. Here (in the capital) no animal may be slaughtered for sacrifice, nor may the holiday feast be held, because His Sacred and Gracious Majesty, the king sees much offence in the holiday feasts, although in certain places holiday feasts are excellent in the sight of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the king.

“Formerly, in the kitchen of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King, each day many hundred thousands of living creatures were slaughtered to make curries. But now, when this pious edict is being written, only three living creatures are slaughtered (daily) for curry, to wit, two peacocks and one antelope: the antelope, however, not invariably. Even those three living creatures henceforth shall not be slaughtered.”

Pillar Edict No.II was in the following terms :

“Thus saith His Sacred and Gracious Majesty, the King :-

“The Law of Piety is excellent. But wherein consists the Law of Piety? In these things, to wit, little piety, many good deeds, compassion, liberality, truthfulness and purity.

The gift of spiritual insight I have given in manifold ways: whilst on two-footed and four-footed beings, on birds and the denizens of the waters, I have conferred various favours-even unto the boon of life; and many other good deeds have I done.

For this purpose, have I caused this pious edict to be written, that men may walk after its teaching, and that it may long endure; and he who will follow its teaching will do well.”

Pillar Edict V says :

“Thus said His Sacred and Gracious Majesty, the king :

When I had been consecrated twenty-six years the following species were declared *exempt from slaughter*, namely :

Parrots, starlings adjutants, Brahmany ducks, geese, *pandimukhas*, *gelatas*, bats, queen-ants, female tortoises, boneless fish, *vedaveyakas*, *gangapuputakas*,

skate, (river) tortoise, porcupines, tree-squirrels, *barasingha* stag, Brahmany bulls, monkeys, rhinoceros, grey doves village pigeons, and *all fourfooted animals which are not utilised or eaten*.

She-goats, ewes, cows, that is to say, those either with young or in milk, are exempt from slaughter as well as their off-spring up to six months of age.

The caponing of cocks must not be done.

Chaff must not be burned along with the living things in it.

Forests must not be burned either for mischief or so as to destroy living creatures.

The living must not be fed with the living. At each of the three seasonal full moons, and at the full moon of the month Tishya (December-January) for three days in each case, namely, the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the first fortnight, and the first day of the second fortnight, as well as on the first days throughout the year, fish is exempt from killing and may not be sold.

“On the same days, in elephant-preserves or fish-ponds no other classes of animals may be destroyed.

On the eighth, fourteenth and fifteenth days of each fortnight, as well as on the Tishya and Punarvasa days and festival days, the castration of bulls must not be performed, nor may he-goats, rams, boars and other animals liable to castration be castrated.

On the Tishya and Punarvasa days, on the seasonal full moon days, and during the fortnights of the seasonal full moons the branding of horses and oxen must not be done.

During the time upto the twenty-sixth anniversary of my consecration twenty-five jail deliveries have been effected.”

So much for the legislation of Asoka.

III

Let us turn to Manu. His Laws contain the the following provisions regarding meat-eating :-

- “V.11. Let him avoid all carnivorous birds and those living in villages, and one hoofed animals which are not specially permitted (to be eaten), and the Tithbha (Parra) Jacana.
- V.12. The sparrow, the Plava, the Hamsa, the Brahmani duck, the village-cock, the Sarasa crane, the Raggudal, the woodpecker, the parrot, and the starling.
- V.13. Those which feed striking with their beaks, web-footed birds, the Koyashti, those which scratch with their toes, those which dive and live on fish, meat from a slaughter-house and dried meat.
- V.14. The Baka and the Balaka crane, the raven, the Khangartaka (animals) that eat fish, village-pigs, and all kinds of fishes.
- V.15. He who eats the flesh of any (animals) is called the eater of the flesh of that (particular) creature, he who eats fish is an eater of every (kind of) flesh; let him therefore avoid fish.

- V.16. (But the fish called) Pathine and (that called) Rohita may be eaten, if used for offering to the gods or to the manes; (one may eat) likewise Ragivas, Simhatundas, and Sasalkas on all occasions.
- V.17. Let him not eat solitary or unknown beasts and birds though they may fall under (the categories of) eatable creatures, not any five-toed (animals).
- V.18. The porcupine, the hedgehog, the iguana, the rhinoceros, the tortoise, and the hare they declare to be eatable; likewise those (domestic animals) that have teeth in one jaw excepting camels."

IV

Here is survey of the legislation both by Asoka and by Manu on the slaughter of animals. We are of course principally concerned with the cow. Examining the legislation of Asoka the question is: Did he prohibit the killing of the cow? On this issue there seems to be a difference of opinion. Prof. Vincent Smith is of opinion that Asoka did not prohibit the killing of the cow. Commenting on the legislation of Asoka on the subject, Prof. Smith says:¹

"It is noteworthy that Asoka's rules do not forbid the slaughter of cow, which, apparently, continued to be lawful."

Prof. Radhakumud Mookerji joins issue with Prof. Smith and says² that Asoka did prohibit the slaughter of the cow. Prof. Mookerji relies upon the reference in Pillar Edict V to the rule of exemption which was made applicable to all four-footed animals and argues that under this rule cow was exempted from killing. This is not a correct reading of the statement in the Edict. The Statement in the Edict is a qualified statement. It does not refer to all four-footed animals but only to four-footed animals, '*which are not utilised or eaten*. 'A cow cannot be said to be a four-footed animal which was not utilized or eaten. Prof. Vincent Smith seems to be correct in saying that Asoka did not prohibit the slaughter of the cow. Prof. Mookerji tries to get out of the difficulty by saying that at the time of Asoka the cow was not eaten and therefore came within the prohibition. His statement is simply absurd for the cow was an animal which was very much eaten by all classes.

It is quite unnecessary to resort as does Prof. Mookerji to a forced construction of the Edict and to make Asoka prohibit the slaughter of the cow as though it was his duty to do so. Asoka had no particular

1. Smith,- Asoka, p. 58

2. Mookerji, Asoka pp. 21, 181, 184

interest in the cow and owed no special duty to protect her against killing. Asoka was interested in the sanctity of all life human as well as animal. He felt his duty to prohibit the taking of life where taking of life was not necessary. That is why he prohibited slaughtering animal for sacrifice¹ which he regarded as unnecessary and of animals which are not utilized nor eaten which again would be wanton and unnecessary. That he did not prohibit the slaughter of the cow in specie may well be taken as a fact which for having regard to the Buddhist attitude in the matter cannot be used against Asoka as a ground for casting blame.

Coming to Manu there is no doubt that he too did not prohibit the slaughter of the cow. On the other hand he made the eating of cow's flesh on certain occasions obligatory.

Why then did the non-Brahmins give up eating beef? There appears to be no apparent reason for this departure on their part. But there must be some reason behind it. The reason I like to suggest is that it was due to their desire to imitate the Brahmins that the non-Brahmins gave up beef-eating. This may be a novel theory but it is not an impossible theory. As the French author, Gabriel Tarde has explained that culture within a society spreads by imitation of the ways and manners of the superior classes by the inferior classes. This imitation is so regular in its flow that its working is as mechanical as the working of a natural law. Gabriel Tarde speaks of the laws of imitation. One of these laws is that the lower classes always imitate the higher classes. This is a matter of such common knowledge that hardly any individual can be found to question its validity.

That the spread of the cow-worship among and cessation of beef-eating by the non-Brahmins has taken place by reason of the habit of the non-Brahmins to imitate the Brahmins who were undoubtedly their superiors is beyond dispute. Of course there was an extensive propaganda in favour of cow-worship by the Brahmins. The Gayatri Purana is a piece of this propaganda. But initially it is the result of the natural law of imitation. This, of course, raises another question: Why did the Brahmins give up beef-eating?

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3 See Rock Edict No. I