

Les Sacrées Vaches: Cow Vigilantism and the future of Indian Democracy

Sunayan Mukherjee and Sayantani Chakraborti

Abstract

The year 2014 could be called a landmark year in the course of Indian history. Not only did it bring a paradigm shift with the BJP (Bharatiya Janta Party) winning a whopping 282 seats out of 543 with an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha elections, thereby becoming the single largest political party in the electoral history of our country post independence, but history was also recreated in the manner of appropriation of the national icon of our country. From the “Ashok Chakra” or the wheel of progress, dharma or righteous path of ethics, it veered to that of the ‘holy cow’ or *gaumata*, as hailed by all and sundry. For the cow does not merely represent Hindu sentiments and ethos but bears a very strong cultural insignia related to the Hindus. The appropriation of this humble beast becomes the first step towards the formation of a Hindu nation or a Hindu *rashtra*. Suddenly the vision of a free, democratic country is torn asunder by the naissance of a Majoritarian State where minor religious groups such as Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and others feel threatened about their existence and practice of religious beliefs. The BJP as an ultra right Fascist party proclaims to build just this. Therefore this image of this ‘holy cow’ is intrinsically linked to brandishing of strong militaristic religious practices, and flexing of power by the majority over the other minorities, crucially linking itself to Hindu identity politics. At the same time, it acts as a strategy to revive the ancient Hindu order, spirit and sentiments, which under the aegis of enlightenment measures adopted by the colonialists was condemned and criticised severely. People who are associated with cow trade, cow slaughter and animal husbandry, typically the Muslims are looked primarily as suspects, labelled as ‘anti-national’ and are lynched, mobbed, brutally beaten up and sometimes even killed. Violence is so vitriolic that such gruesome acts are sometimes filmed and shared all over the social media. The present paper would talk about such instances of ‘cow vigilantism’ happening in the country in the light of a French comic book *Les Sacrées Vaches* or (Holy Cows) written by a William de Tamaris and illustrated by Jorg Maillet published in *La Revue Dessinée* (2017). Our argument shall be on the construction of the image of the holy cow, how it has appropriated itself into the leitmotif of a strong Hindu culture, how a theocratic culture has marginalized the Muslims breeding hatred and finally how such apocryphal violations against humanity have dented the picture of India as a plural, democratic society. We will use the comic book as the fulcrum of our argument and would try to find a connection of it with the present day to day reality. All in-text translations are done by the authors.

Keywords: Les Sacrées Vaches (Holy Cows), graphic novel, cow vigilantism, majoritarianism, identity politics, perilous democracy