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## One man's beef...

Pankaj Mishra finds the roots of post-Partition conflict in DN Jha's account of India's sacred cows, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*



**Pankaj Mishra**  
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### **The Myth of the Holy Cow**

by DN Jha

183pp, Verso, £16

Shortly before he died, at the age of 101, the Anglo-Bengali scholar and polemicist Nirad Chaudhuri received the leader of the Hindu nationalist BJP party, LK Advani, at his home in Oxford. The Hindu nationalists, who recently presided in Gujarat over India's worst-ever anti-Muslim pogrom, had been pleased by some of Chaudhuri's offhand denunciations of the medieval Muslim invaders of India.

They probably hoped that India's most distinguished intellectual exile would do more for their fascistic cause, but they hadn't fully reckoned with Chaudhuri, who interrogated Advani about his knowledge of India. He was still full of scorn when I saw him weeks later. "These wretched BJP types," he told me, "they call themselves cultural nationalists, speak of an ancient Hindu ethos, yet do not know Sanskrit, know nothing of their own history. Such barbarous people!"

The sayings and beliefs of religious fundamentalists are often taken at face value. As fervent believers, they seem not to have any truck with rational politics. But it is important to realise how pathetically little they know about the religious and spiritual traditions that supposedly inform their political beliefs; and how the superior morality they noisily lay claim to is important to them only so far as it can give legitimacy to resolutely unspiritual ambitions to capture state power in their native countries. This marks most of the fundamentalists as inescapably modern: people quite like us.

The middle-class Hindu nationalists of India are no different. Their agenda - a militaristic nation-state with a culturally homogeneous population of Hindus - resembles not so much anything in the Bhagavad-Gita as it does the nation- and empire-building projects of 19th-century Europe.

They redefine many of their preferred aspects of Indian tradition and culture, and present them as eternal and immutable, interrupted only by alien Muslims and other unclean foreigners. They fear the kind of scholarship that reveals that Indian tradition, like all other traditions, is a man-made thing, vulnerable to endless change, revision, and appropriation.

The education minister in the present Indian government, a promoter of astrology and something called "Vedic Mathematics", recently compared India's most distinguished intellectuals to terrorists. And now DN Jha, a respected historian of ancient India, is under attack for daring to examine the myth of the sacred cow.

His book was turned down by its original publishers in Delhi, who were afraid of provoking the Hindu fanatics who have recently been seen vandalising art exhibitions and burning books. One extremist even sentenced Jha to death in a fatwa - plainly a venerable Hindu tradition, this.

It may be hard at first to figure out what the fuss is about. Certainly, Jha did not set out to provoke. His main thesis - that beef-eating was not unknown to Indians of the pre-Muslim period - is neither new nor startling.

Visitors to India are often baffled by the wide berth given to even those very emaciated

and diseased cows that seem to exist for no other purpose than to slow down the traffic on some of the world's most dangerous roads. But the cow wasn't sacred to the nomads and pastoralists from Central Asia who settled North India in the second millennium BC and created the high Brahminical culture of what we now know as Hinduism.

These Indians slaughtered cattle for both food and the elaborate sacrificial rituals prescribed by the Vedas, the first and the holiest Indian scriptures. After they settled down and turned to agriculture, they put a slightly higher value upon the cow: it produced milk, ghee, yoghurt and manure and could be used for ploughing and transport as well.

Indian religion and philosophy after the Vedas rejected the ritual killing of animals. This may have also served to protect the cow. But beef eating was still not considered a sin. It is often casually referred to in the earliest Buddhist texts. The great Indian emperor Ashoka, who instituted non-violence as state policy in the third century BC, did not ban the slaughter of cattle.

It is only in the early medieval period that the eating of beef became a taboo, if only for upper-caste Hindus. But the cow was far from holy. It is significant that no cow-goddesses, or temples to cows, feature in India's anarchically all-inclusive polytheisms.

Jha elaborates on how variously the ancient Indians saw their cattle; and he does so, if not with a graceful prose-style, then with an impressive range of textual evidence.

It is good to have all the relevant facts in one book. But, perhaps, Jha would have better engaged the general reader had he explained in greater detail why upper-caste Hindus have been more passionate about the cow in the last century and a half than at any other time in India's history. Or, as DD Kosambi put it in his *Ancient India* (1965), why "a modern orthodox Hindu would place beef-eating on the same level as cannibalism, whereas Vedic Brahmins had fattened upon a steady diet of sacrificed beef".

The answer lies in the 19th century, when many newly emergent middle-class Hindus began to see the cow as an important symbol of a glorious tradition defiled by Muslim rule over India. For these Hindus, the cause for banning cow-slaughter became a badge of identity, part of their quest for political power in post-colonial India. Educated Muslims felt excluded from, even scorned by, these Hindu notions of the Indian past; and they developed their own separatist fantasies.

The newly invented traditions helped create two antagonistic political elites, defined primarily by religion, and eventually led to the disastrous partition of India. The nationalist myths are now incarnated by the two nuclear-armed nation-states of India and Pakistan.

DN Jha is their most recent victim; but probably no one has suffered more from them than the poor holy cow that, bereft of a clear economic or religious role, slowly dwindles on Indian roads, until the day it is run over, when it receives the final kindness of being allowed to bleed to death.

• Pankaj Mishra is the author of *The Romantics* (Picador)