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## The Conundrum of ‘Abandoned Cattle’ in the UP Polls

By: Ankur Bisen

*Cow protection and ‘aawara pashu’ are two sides of the same coin and both are politically caught in a bind.*

**Ankur Bisen writes:**

The enactment of the Cow Protection Bill, 2017 in Uttar Pradesh (UP) saw a high-decibel celebration by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state, and it had the right to do so. The BJP has never been ambiguous about its plans for the cow and neither have its sizeable number of supporters in the state. Both want the cow to be installed on a pedestal of reverence—a long-held desire that has many repercussions, which have yet to be properly thought through. As we shall soon see.

When the cow turned semi-divine, UP saw the emergence of *gau rakshaks* (cow protectors) and the opening of *gaushalas* (cow shelters). The movement of cows (and bulls) to abattoirs was criminalised, suspending trade, livelihoods, and rights—primarily of Muslims and everyone in between. It was a dream run for Hindutva politics and its admirers. They held photo-ops with their new deity, shouted down any voice of reason that attempted to challenge them, and smelled out conspiracies to justify lynching people who were perceived to dishonour the cow.

Here, the question to ask is that if cow protection has been such a stupendous success, why is it not crowding out everything else in the BJP’s campaign for the UP assembly elections? Barring one mention in a speech by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Varanasi in December 2021, this achievement has remained in the shadows.

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When Om Prakash Rajbhar, an influential leader in the Poorvanchal region and founder of the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, which had been an ally of the BJP till 2019, announced his decision to join the Samajwadi Party alliance for the coming assembly election, he was asked to name the most important issue that concerned rural UP. “Aawara pashu” (abandoned cattle), he said, without batting an eyelid. He went on to claim that 70% of the cases treated at any trauma centre in UP today had to do with injuries caused by abandoned cattle.

Though Rajbhar’s comment highlighted the issue, it did not go all the way to its root cause. Much the same could be said of all opposition parties in UP. The issue of aawara pashu, which has snowballed into a crisis in the last five years, begs to be addressed. But this problem has yet to find a place on the opposition’s agenda.

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This is an interesting conundrum. For the BJP, the success of the cow protection law is undeniable. Cows as deities roam the streets of UP, unhinged and without fear. The government has opened gaushalas and diverted funds to run them at the expense of other priorities such as health and education. Many in the Muslim community who were engaged in the meat and leather industry are viewed as culprits by Hindutva politics. They have been marginalised and their livelihoods have evaporated. For those that sought an assertive Hindu identity by deifying cows (but had little stake in rearing them for a supplementary income), the cow protection law has worked like a charm, as the BJP intended.

After the enactment of the law, the BJP pitched gaushalas to compensate for the disruption in the lives of those engaged in animal husbandry. But not only were many of these gaushalas filthy and inadequate, they also served as pretexts to grab land and doubled as dens of corruption. The state had the misplaced notion that a commercially viable meat industry that handled millions of cattle could be replaced by such gaushalas. This was not just a matter of inadequacy—the industry’s nature needs dairy at one end, and meat and leather at the other for the cycle to make commercial sense to farmers and everyone in between.

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The cow protection law has wreaked havoc on an industry that was working well and the farmer has been left with no choice but to abandon his cows after he has no use for them. Not surprisingly, the self-appointed gau-rakshaks and others have figured out how to exploit this ill-conceived plan. They have started to moonlight as cattle smugglers, and what was a perfectly legal trade before 2017 has now become a rent-seeking enterprise.

Cow protection and aawara pashu are two sides of the same coin and both are politically caught in a bind. The BJP ignores the successes it has harvested from the cow protection law and the opposition parties ignore the aawara pashu and its role in exacerbating rural distress.

To a rational mind, the repeal of the cow protection law and restoration of the meat industry to the pre-2017 avatar is the only way out of this logjam. But, there is a lack of such rational thinking because there was the issue of cattle theft in the state before the cow protection law came in 2017. In the 2000s, the rise of meat exports and the growth of diary led to a spurt in animal husbandry in the state. Between 2005 and 2014, UP recorded a double-digit growth in meat exports. If UP had been an independent country, it would have been among the top 10 meat exporters in the world in 2016.

But this also led to cattle theft and smuggling, which caused frequent skirmishes across rural UP. This is the backdrop that could explain the current strategic political silence on the issue. In 2015, while the government was planning to formalise the meat industry to address the issue, cattle theft had begun to shape local politics in the state. The outsized share of Muslims in the meat trade provided rich fodder to Hindutva politics, and farmers supported the Hindutva pitch of cow protection, seeing it as a panacea for cattle theft. So, when the BJP government halted cattle trade and slaughter in 2017, it did not cause a flutter among the farming community, which had its own objectives.

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It is possible that the UP farmer, after marrying his idea of cow protection to his identity as a Hindu to halt the problem of cattle theft since 2017, is now unable to reconcile himself with its aftermath of aawara pashu. He perhaps feels embarrassed to say that he does not want the cow to be protected anymore but fears being labelled anti-Hindu by his neighbour. But his neighbour also thinks the same way, and so does the neighbour next to him. It is entirely possible that many farmers across UP now give two hoots about the cow as a deity, but they suffer from a Stockholm-type syndrome that makes it very difficult for them to admit that the Hindutva politics they cheered for is the culprit. The BJP knows that in its pursuit of the votes of those who feel ecstatic about the cow’s deity status it hurt farmers who have real stakes in the cattle trade. This explains why the picture of the cow is missing from its marketing paraphernalia in the run-up to the state election.

The opposition parties may want to call out the cow protection law as the real creator of aawara pashu but they are not sure if the perceived “Hinduness” of farmers will lead them to resist this. They are still not convinced the Hindu farmer is ready to accept cattle slaughter in exchange for freedom from aawara pashu. It is this potency of Hindutva politics that makes one a prisoner of one’s own perceptions.

Now, politicians and farmers are looking at each other for a way out. “There can’t be any economic progress without ‘social harmony,’” was the inspiring comment made by Jayant Chaudhary, leader of the Rashtriya Lok Dal, in an interview to an English daily in January 2022. The cow in UP aptly exemplifies this sentiment. For the farms of the Hindu farmers to be free from aawara pashu, the meat business that was conducted by Muslims and others in the state will have to return to what it was before the cow’s apotheosis. More than the economic logic of this assertion, it is the lesson on social harmony that first needs to be embraced by UP’s farmers. Only then can the state’s politics follow through.