Exploring Carnism in Colonial India

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Abstract

The existing historical research on colonial India has focused on a humanist standpoint and has not adequately addressed the unique form of speciesism imposed by Europeans. The colonial view of the environment as a resource to be exploited, along with the commercialization of animal-derived products, changed how domesticated animals were perceived in India—from family members to sources of commercial goods and laid the foundations of the white and red revolutions that were to come in the postcolonial period. Further historical analysis of colonial and post-colonial animal husbandry policies is needed with a focus on animal sentience and the need for sustainable food alternatives.

Keywords

Colonialism, orientalism, animals, cattle, vegetarianism, veganism, speciesism, carnism, commercialisation, ecological imperialism, slaughterhouse, factory farming.

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To write history of systemic oppression of a particular group, class or a section of the society, the framework of study needs to put the perspective of that group at the centre. These kinds of histories emerge out of the larger paradigm which the intellectual representation of the group has built. This paradigm is a direct result of the grievances that group has felt throughout history and the emancipatory trajectory that its intellectuals, leaders and representatives have agreed upon. These schools of historiography are the direct result of the larger trends that emerge within the social sciences. These works put in perspective the historical experience of the group and are used by the reform movement/revolution to emphasise the immediate need to put an end to their grievances. Examples of such trends are Dalit history, history of Women, African–American history and history of class struggle. Just as production relations are studied through Marxist lens and the condition of women is studied through Feminist lens, the condition of animals is studied through Vegan lens. Veganism is the principle that aims to end the exploitation of nonhuman animals by human ones through abstinence (as far as is possible) from animal–derived products like meat, eggs, dairy, honey, fur, leather etc. and other practices and industries that involve animal cruelty. This goes against the logically and ethically flawed assumptions that support exploitation of animals: speciesism and carnism. The belief that humans are inherently superior to other species is called speciesism and the belief that meat consumption is natural, normal and necessary is called carnism. Veganism is the rational and ethical counter to these norms.

An essential aspect of carnism and speciesism that is relevant to the study of relations between human and nonhuman animals in a subjugated society like colonial India is the cultural relativity of both phenomena. Classification of a particular species as food and abhorrence at the same application to other changes according to culture. While in Indic religions the cow is considered sacred and *Aghanyâ* (inviolable), the buffalo is neither protected by religious conventions nor by law. In India, it is bred, used for milk and slaughtered for leather, meat, etc. On the other hand, beef is popular in the West and the Muslim world. Similarly, dining on dog meat is prevalent in China and South-East Asia. Viewing these phenomena from an egalitarian perspective such as veganism renders little room for cultural bias. Cultural encounters throughout history have become an important source for studying the evolution of these attitudes and tastes in different societies. Here, we are concerned with the Indian and European human attitudes towards viewing the flesh of dead nonhuman animals as food.

After a relative lull in the Middle Ages, the Age of Discovery reconnected India and Europe economically. Consequently, there was a spurt in interest regarding India and its people. Many travellers, adventurers, chroniclers, traders, missionaries, and civil servants who came to India have left behind memoirs detailing their experiences and opinions of the country's diverse regions. These accounts give us an insight into the Eurocentric view of India as it prevailed during the Enlightenment era. As the British colonial state acquired a large Indian empire, it imposed this view as a tool of power and hegemony to ensure its stability. The British sought to establish this hegemony in every aspect of the Indian environment that they thought to be useful, suitable and pragmatic. They embarked upon what Alfred Crossby (1986) has called 'ecological imperialism' that resulted in a radical transformation of existing food-producing systems and their ecological basis. According to Gadgil and Guha (1992), colonialism had three main effects on the ecological and social fabric of Indian society:

(a) A change from subsistence-oriented resource gathering and food production to commercial production;
(b) The dissolution of cohesive local communities and their institutions and the rise of individualism in their stead; and
(c) The disintegration of a system of constraints on traditional resource use as a result of markets developing as the focal points for organising access to resources.

The exclusivist state control over certain plant and animal species in pre-colonial times was without the objective of commercialisation. Carnist tendencies in the background of it all and the commercial interests of the colonial state laid the foundations over which the edifice of the modern Indian dairy and meat industry would later stand tall. While the carnist tendencies feature in eighteenth-century writings on India, the commercial interests lie in the background of the animal husbandry policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The lens through which the British attempted to gain insight into the Indian environment and culture was kept at the height of imperial haughtiness. The hegemony over resources was justified through hegemony over knowledge. This was the context within which the British undertook the enterprise of producing knowledge of the vast landmass and its people that they had just conquered.

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The intellectual confidence that the Enlightenment had produced and the conviction in the objectivity of Western modes of 'scientific' inquiry gave way to the Europeans pronouncing themselves to have been perpetually more civilised than the 'orientals'. The central thesis of Edward Said in his acclaimed tract *Orientalism* is that this project was not born out of any honest intellectual curiosity towards or empathy for the cultures of the East, but was a service in the maintenance of the edifice that was Colonialism. The European attitudes towards the philosophy and culture of the East can be understood within the framework of hegemonic Eurocentric discourse beginning from classical Greece and which grew into a project of cultural imperialism in the modern period.

Although Said's work focused on European imperialism in the Middle East, Indian scholars have found this framework to be viable in investigating the British attitude towards the Indian ways of life. Gyan Prakash (1990), for instance, has argued that this scholarly pursuit was from the beginning a hegemonic project that objectified India, its resources and its people. Ronald Inden (2002) has also charged the Orientalists with romanticising India in an effort to justify colonisation. This project of knowledge creation seems to be a means towards better subjugation and administration of the newly conquered subjects rather than being an end in itself. It was heavily influenced by the conservative values that constituted the larger imperial ideology, like 'military autocracy, hierarchy and racial insolence.'[1] Using this newly acquired knowledge of Indian history, society and culture, the British intellectuals provided a justification for their civilising mission in the country, leading to practical, cultural discrimination.[2] They appropriated the authority to pronounce judgments on the Orient and claimed that the European orientalists knew more about the Orient than the orientals themselves.

According to Said (1978), the Orientalist body of knowledge and thought was based on the creation rather than an objective analysis of the Orient. It created a head-to-toe epistemological and ontological distinction between the Orient and Occident, confining the former to a place of perpetual inferiority vis-a-vis the latter (p. 25). The Orient was described in essentialist terms and given a place frozen in

1. Bandyopadhyay S. (2007). *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* (Repr). Orient Longman, Pg. 66.
2. Teltscher, Kate. (1995). *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, Pg. 111.

history with rigid structures, exotic aesthetics and quaint customs. The emotional and spiritual Indian was pitted against the rational and materialist British. This creation was marked by a superiority complex and a claim of objectivity, with only a few sincere attempts at unbiased research.[3] However, we should remain wary of looking at every European quest for knowledge in India only from the Saidian perspective. The European study of the Orient prior to colonial authority, as evidenced by the writings of European diplomats, travellers, traders, and missionaries, is not adequately explained by the Saidian framework. In some cases, romantic orientalism led to a critique of the imperialistic project. The Saidian paradigm also falls short of explaining why Germans, like Max Müller, were so passionate about studying the Orient, given that Germany had no imperial projects in India.

Few works on colonial India position nonhuman animal sentience at the centre of their discussion. The exploitative nature of colonial rule has been brought out only from a humanist standpoint and has failed to offer any perspective on the unique form of speciesism that the Europeans held and imposed on the colonised subjects, both human and nonhuman. British antipathy towards Indian spiritual values of ecological non-violence as being effeminate and culturally enfeebling is clear when we study the beginning of animal use in India at an industrial level. The colonial perception of the subject environment as a resource to be exploited and the capitalist tendency of commercialisation of finished products drastically changed the Indian perception of domesticated animals. The image of a domesticated animal as a family member transformed into that of a source of commercialised dairy and meat. The ancient ideal of paúu ahiCsâ that had been the central feature of Indian vegetarianism is seen to be on the back burner in the times of colonial 'modernity.'

While popular Hindu animal sensibilities grew around the symbol of the cow as a medium of communal mobilisation, the late Victorian morality had little to do with the vegetarian movement that gained momentum in Britain since the mid-nineteenth century. Case studies by Samiparna Samanta in her work *Meat, Mercy and Morality* have demonstrated paradoxical and contradictory attitudes towards animals in both British and Bengali minds. Different interests motivated animal

3. As Kejariwal (1988) notes, William Jones (1746–1795), the founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and an Orientalist, despite his motives regarding administration, was generally supportive of Indian culture. Similarly, H.T. Colebrooke (1735–1867), a well-known Sanskritist, advocated for the building of a museum on the grounds of the Asiatic Society in order to preserve and exhibit the relics of India's past.

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protectionism from the British: for some, they were economic and for some, a way of civilising the Indian poor. The British officials and the Hindu zamindars as members of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were motivated by such elite interests and didn't extend the concept of kindness towards animals to dietary choices. Indeed, the British vegetarian movement was influenced by the Indian values of non-violence and its impact can be seen in the native voices lending their support to traditional vegetarianism. It would be interesting to see whether these social and intellectual developments had any impact on the carnist policies that the British implemented in India.

Animal husbandry as a scientific field gained legitimation in colonial India with gradual acceptance from the native forces as the British assumed moral and political agency for implementing their policies on the subject environment. Advancements in the field of animal science and nutrition were practically applied with little concern for animal life as an end in itself. Animal health was made into a concern only from a utilitarian point of view as it was inextricably linked to human health. The livestock farms, dairy farms, poultry farms and slaughterhouses haven't been looked into as sites of human-nonhuman interaction that emerged or transformed as a result of scientific modernity that the Europeans introduced in the colonised societies. The need for historical analyses of these phenomena is felt when the repercussions that follow in the postcolonial capitalist global economy are studied from an environmental and ethical perspective.[4]

The available research provides information from either the colonial or the nationalist point of view. The latter keeps native farmers' interests at the centre, criticising the colonial government for not doing enough in the face of widespread poverty and the low productivity of Indian cattle. The *vegan* praxis regards dairy as a cruel industry that views animals as a source of wealth and has clear economic links with the meat industry.[5] The impact of the commercialisation of milk through military dairy farms (first at Allahabad in 1889), dairy processing plants, artificial insemination, cattle 'improvement' and management, breeding practices, marketing organisations and dairy cooperatives on Indian cattle life remains to be assessed and any possible

4. Parlasca, M. C., & Qaim, M. (2022). Meat Consumption and Sustainability. *Annual Review of Resource Economics*, 14(1), Pg. 17–41.
5. Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organizations (FIAPO). (2011). *The State of Dairy Cattle in India*. New Delhi: FIAPO. 36 pages.

linkage with the slaughterhouse to be investigated. A path should be laid out for a critical analysis of colonial and post-colonial animal husbandry policies by positioning animal sentience at the centre and recognising the acute need for environmentally sustainable land use and food alternatives in the face of the modern climate crisis.

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