

Vegetarianism and Animal Rights : Need for a Rational Approach

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In the last few decades, some enthusiasts have carried out a sustained campaign on the virtues of vegetarianism as against non-vegetarianism, on the need for greater compassion towards animals and an eco-friendly life style. They have successfully brought into focus issues such as animal rights, public health vis-a-vis animals (zoonotic disease etc.), inefficient utilization of scarce resources in the path of meat production. While acknowledging the positive contribution made by these activists in generating a healthy debate and greater awareness among the general public, it must be said that of late this movement is going haywire, what with every Tom, Dick and Harry coming out with a novel idea to educate us gullible Indians on the dangers we are inviting for ourselves by eating meat, the grave mistake zoology students, medical and animal scientists are committing by using mice, rats, guinea pigs and hamsters in their works.

A modified version of Goebblesian propaganda with an excellent mix of truths, irrelevant truths, half truths and blatant lies has been launched by a section of these 'activists' on everything that they find themselves uncomfortable with, or does not suit their idea of 'development'. Let me substantiate my point. They are correct when they say meat production is an inefficient method of resource utilization since it takes several kilograms of grains to produce a kg of meat. But it is only a half truth as far as mutton, cara beef (buffalo meat), beef and chevon (goat meat) are concerned. They do not compete with human beings for their food. They eat grass, leaves straws etc., and convert them into valuable human food. So the argument of these meat being eco-unfriendly does not hold much water.

Then, what about chicken and pork? are the so called 'saviours of animal rights' absolutely right atleast here? No. Here it is a case of irrelevant truth, borrowed ideas and arguments far removed from the ground realities. In western countries like England, USA and Canada, pigs and poultry are raised exclusively on grains since they have a surplus. In India poultry are raised mainly on

crop byproducts like brans, polishings, inferior grade grains and fish wastes. Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), Department of Science and Technology and Department of Biotechnology are pumping in crores of rupees into research on utilization of unconventional feed stuffs like squilla meal, tapioca meal, prawn waste etc. With a viable swine industry non existent, per capita meat consumption at about one kg per annum as against the recommended level of 10.9 kg per annum, Indian poultry sector does not deserve the kind of harsh criticism reserved for it by our 'activist' brethren.

A couple of years back, Bangalore chapter of an All India Animal Rights group circulated a pamphlet which exhorted people to keep away from chicken meat lest they be infected with Avian leukosis (a rare variety of avian cancer not communicable to man). When a few students from the Bangalore veterinary college contested their claims, in a signed letter, its chairman announced the withdrawal of the pamphlet from circulation and assured them that she would seek clarification from the person who had contributed that piece of information who, interestingly, happens to be the fountain head of animal rights movement in the country. Till today no one knows what prompted them to indulge in such gimmic. All of us especially those in public life, should understand that two truths with a lie is as good (or bad) as three lies when it comes to question of credibility.

Recent reports quoting leaders of the Indian Vegetarian Congress (IVC) and Kerala Animal Lovers Association (KALA) have sent shock waves among the general public. Their claim that growing incidence of heart diseases and cancer is due to non-vegetarian food habit defies logic and seeks to pass on assumptions as scientifically proven facts. It is high time they come out with proofs in support of their claims which, of course, should stand the test of scientific scrutiny!

The list of demands in the memorandum submitted by IVC and KALA to the Kerala Government smacks of fascist tendencies, viz. intolerance and an effort to impose their will on the people. What else can one read into

the demands of KALA and IVC such as ban on issuing of licence to abattoirs and non-vegetarian restaurants? Humane slaughter of animals, provision of hygienic meat supply to consumers, freeing the meat trade from the clutches of unscrupulous elements, preventing the loss of precious revenue to the exchequer require that modern abattoirs be built in all cities.

Moreover, can a minuscule minority decide what we should eat and drink? If the notification in the 'Gazette of India' is an indicator, those days are not far off.

The notification in question by the Ministry of Environment and Forests has announced the new Breeding of, and Experiments on animals (control and supervision) rule, 1998. The new rule makes it mandatory to obtain prior permission from the Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on Animals (CPCSEA) headed by Mrs. Maneka Gandhi for any research on, or breeding of lab animals for the purpose of experimentation. What is the harm if this rule is promulgated? Nothing except that if our Pathology Professor discovers that a few of his students need an extra practical hour, a few extra mice to work on, he may have to wait for a few months since he has to first convince Mrs. Gandhi and her committee that they really deserve those extra mice!

For this fiasco, a part of the blame should be shared by the scientific community. It did nothing when such highly objectionable

provisions as those prohibiting the use of animals for acquisition or improvement of manual skills were being inserted into the Cruelty to Animals (Prevention) Act, 1960. It woke up from its deep slumber only when it became certain that the new enforcement mechanism being erected in the form of CPCSEA would cast a spell of doom for the future of science in the country. If the above provisions are followed in letter and spirit, our future doctor friends, in the absence of training on live animals, are certain to inject life into the old Sanskrit saying, "Shata Hatho Pandita" (Becoming knowledgeable by killing a hundred)!

Moreover, it is clear that IVC and KALA's demands have all the potential for becoming a part of Mrs. Gandhi's agenda for the coming year. It is unfortunate that issues such as compassion for animals which would automatically receive the support of all progressive elements in our society should generate unending controversies. The blame should squarely lie at the door steps of those who seek to introduce narrow, prejudiced definitions into the whole idea of compassion for animals and those giving irresponsible statements. Can't we propagate and popularise vegetarianism on its own strength without resorting to devious tactics? Can't we formulate a code of procedure for animal experimentation and enforce it with periodic checks, instead of erecting a bureaucratic maze?

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Once upon a time, there was a non-conforming sparrow who decided not to fly south for the winter. However, soon the weather turned so cold that he reluctantly started to fly south. In a short time ice began to form on his wings and he fell to earth in a farmyard, almost frozen to death.

A cow passed by and shat on the little sparrow. The sparrow thought it was the end. But the manure warmed him and defrosted his wings. Warm and happy, able to breathe, he started to sing. Just then a large cat came by and hearing the chirping, investigated the sounds.

The cat cleared away the manure, found the chirping bird and promptly ate him.

The moral of the story is:

1. Everyone who shits on you is not necessarily your enemy.
2. Everyone who gets you out of the shit is not necessarily your friend.
3. And if you're warm and happy in a pile of shit, keep your mouth shut.