Dark and dairy: The sorry tale of the milch animals

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India has been making national and international headlines for its soaring beef exports. However, while there is ambivalence about India’s place in the beef market, there is more or less unquestioned pride about the nation’s status as the world’s largest producer of milk. We have riots over rumours of cow slaughter. But the consumption of milk and milk products is a near-universal habit in India, probably more so among vegetarians than others. We revere cows as mothers because we use their milk. But if our dairy practices are any indication, we don’t treat our mothers well.

It’s clear that meat comes from slaughtered animals. It’s less obvious that dairy production is as traumatic and lethal to animals. Beef and milk are two sides of the same coin, especially in India where cattle and buffaloes are farmed primarily for milk. There are no ‘beef’ animals in India. Yet, bovine meat constitutes 62 per cent of India’s total meat production. Beef, in India, is sourced from the dairy industry, which is economically sustainable only because it is supported by the meat and meat by-products industries (such as leather). Therefore, if we care about cattle, we should first look into the lives of milch animals.

The dairy system inflicts suffering at every stage, starting with the calving process, for milk comes from a cow or a buffalo that has calved recently. For dairy farming to be financially viable, animals are made to calve at least once a year (for cows) and once in 15 months (for buffaloes). Calves, male and female, are separated or significantly restricted from accessing their mothers three to four days after birth. This separation is traumatic for both mother and calf, but leads to a 15-30 per cent increase in milk availability for humans. Following separation, calves are mainly fed on milk substitutes and are allowed only limited suckling. The mother’s milk is instead diverted for human consumption. Most male calves are either sent for slaughter or let loose to starve. A limited number are used for breeding. Some are used as draught animals where they are subject to castration without anaesthesia, nose-roping, whipping and hard labour until they are old and weak. At that point, they are sent for slaughter or abandoned. The economic undesirability of male cattle is evident in the gender imbalance — 64.42 per cent female and 35.57 per cent male in cattle, and 85.18 per cent female and 14.8 per cent male in buffalo. The slaughter of male calves — whether intentional or incidental — is integral to milk production.

Healthy females are kept alive for use in the dairy industry, which means a repeated cycle of impregnation, separation, painful milking, oxytocin shots and mastitis. To keep dairy animals productive, animal husbandry manuals recommend re-impregnation around 60 days after calving — a longer calving interval is uneconomical and a shorter interval reduces milk production.

Impregnation is increasingly being carried out through artificial insemination. India’s National Dairy Plan aims to use artificial insemination on at least 35 per cent of all fertile animals by the end of 2017. Artificial insemination involves extracting semen from selected bulls and forcibly placing it in restrained cows. This technology is popular because it is efficient, allows for selective breeding of high-yielding animals and reduces the need for males.

Dairy farming involves the killing of unproductive, infertile and ‘spent’ cows and buffaloes. Milk production starts to decline after three to four lactations (pregnancies). At this stage, cows and buffaloes are sold for slaughter through
middlemen, or to a smaller farmer who will use them for an additional two to three lactations before selling them for slaughter or abandoning them. An infertile or unproductive animal shares the same fate, only much earlier. India’s world-beating output of 132.4 million tonnes of milk in 2012-13 would not have been possible if cattle and buffalo were taken care of for the entirety of their natural life-spans.

Dairy cattle have a terrible choice: life can be nasty, brutish and short, if you are male; or nasty, brutish and longer, if you are female. Beef is an inevitable consequence of dairy. The data bear out this hypothesis. Figures provided by the National Dairy Development Board show that the monetary value of milk production almost tripled between 2004-05 and 2011-12. So did the monetary value of beef production. There was a 98.6 per cent match between milk and beef production over this period.

Both qualitatively and quantitatively, a milch cow or buffalo has a worse life than an animal bred solely for meat. Why, then, do we believe dairy to be better than beef?

Part of the explanation lies in psychology. Meat is obviously linked to the death of a fellow-creature. The impacts of dairy are easily veiled in narratives about ‘surplus milk’ and the Indian veneration of the cow. Of course, buffaloes that provide more than half the milk we consume as a nation don’t figure in these debates.

Neither do the environmental consequences of dairy farming, whether pollution caused by runoffs, greenhouse gas emissions, or high water footprints.

Ultimately, Indian vegetarianism is about us rather than the vulnerable creatures we claim to care for. We may prefer to turn our eyes away from the connection between our individual acts of drinking our filter coffee or morning chai, and the cow or buffalo that produced the milk.

The logic, however, is clear: drinking milk causes as much suffering as eating meat, if not more. Indeed, milk involves more cruelty than meat does.

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