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ISSUES

Animal Sacrifice

One brave woman leads the fight for a total end to ritual killing

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You can love her or hate her, but you can't ignore the lady. Maneka Gandhi, widow of Sanjay, the late Indira Gandhi's assassinated son, will make herself heard, no matter what the odds. So animal lovers thronged Mysore, India, in August, 1998, from all across Karnataka to be inspired by this activist's forceful message of ahimsa, nonviolence, and to chart out a future plan of action. The Mysore chapter of People For Animals was formally inaugurated by Mrs. Gandhi, federal Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment under the BJP ruling government. Her workshop on "Prevention of Ritual Sacrifice of Animals" was a turning point.

For the first time, the lack of animal rights in India had come out of the closet. Many animal lovers had been keeping the issue to themselves, not interacting with others in as bold a way as they did at this meeting. Here, numerous animal welfare organizations banded together--PFA, Compassion Unlimited Plus Action, Animal Awareness Agency, Beauty Without Cruelty and other wildlife support groups. Previously,

animal welfare was considered an arena of crackpots--mostly bored housewives and old women--but the workshop proved that a generous swathe of Indian society is concerned with man's injustices toward hapless animals. It includes successful people from all walks of life--judges, policemen and doctors to college students, journalists and executives. The Mysore workshop was crucial in that the emotional topic of ritual sacrifice of animals hadn't been broached earlier.

Animal sacrifice is a "barbaric and uncivilized practice," affirmed Maneka Gandhi, which has no place in law or religious texts. And "sacrifice" mentioned in those texts has been misinterpreted as animal sacrifice. Ritual killing of animals, she pointed out, is basically of two types: 1) The first is a social phenomenon, carried out during festivals or other village gatherings. 2) The second type is done in more private and personal ways. For satisfaction of petty wants, such as economic difficulty, sickness in the family, passing examinations and inaugurating a new bus or a house, people take vows to sacrifice animals. The designated animals can either be domestic or wild, further endangering our already fragile ecology.

Hindu temples that host and sanctify sacrifices are not always age-old citadels or roadside shrines. Recently, numerous ad hoc temples have sprung up that encourage the slaughter. Maneka recounted the instance of a woman from Hyderabad who, after getting a steady job as an extra in Hindi films, started a small, one-room temple to thank God for giving her a chance to dance with popular heroines. She became a celebrity in her area, and people aspiring to become actresses in films started offering sacrifices in that temple. The room

eventually became a fountain of blood.

Maneka also noted a strong nexus between priests, moneylenders, contractors and butchers who have a vested interest in continuing the practice of animal sacrifice. The web works like this: temples are leased to contractors and all offerings go into the kitty of the temple trust, trustees and their families. In connivance with butchers and moneylenders, priests and contractors convince gullible villagers to sacrifice animals for sundry reasons. Sometimes villagers have to borrow from moneylenders to buy the sacrificial animal (larger animals fetch higher prices). Butchers do their cruel work behind the temples after the event. All this creates public health problems, because animals are sacrificed under extremely unhygienic conditions. As a side-effect, liquor shops spring up near temples, and an anti-social spirit grows in the entire village.

Discussion of animal sacrifice should be divorced from religion, Maneka advised, and dealt with in a clear, brusque, rational, professional and humanitarian manner. Many people refuse to acknowledge that it is an issue about being humane. Nobody wants to touch the topic as long as people see it as a religious one. This even includes the police. They think that it will become explosive. Fortunately, changes are happening. In 1998, George Fernandes, India's Minister of Defence, banned sacrifices by the Gurkha regiment of the Indian Army. Another achievement surfaced in Uttanahalli village near Mysore, where PFA members effectively stopped ritual killing in one year with the help of a clear-headed police officer who simply enforced the law.

Justice Saldanha of Karnataka's High Court, attending the Mysore workshop, confirmed that ritual sacrifice of animals is illegal, citing the Karnataka Prevention of Animal Sacrifices Act, 1959. The law includes birds, and the place of worship includes "in or around." This was necessary because, in many instances, people simply take the animal out of the precincts of the place of worship to sacrifice it. Taking life in temples is a contradiction in terms, he said. The fundamental rights which refer to the right to life should mean the "right to life of all forms."

For significant change to occur, police must be sensitized to the issue of animal rights, noted Sunil Agarwal of the Indian Police Service. He admitted that until PFA Mysore gave him a copy of the laws, he himself was not aware of them. But after that, he says, he immediately booked the culprits in Uttanahalli village. Most villagers were persuaded to see reason, and those hardened beyond any hope for reform were simply told that they were engaging in unlawful activity and would be suitably punished.

Maneka Gandhi bears the compassion and zeal of millions. She's the founder of People For Animals, chairperson of the Delhi Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and managing trustee of the Ruth Cowell Foundation, an animal care shelter and hospital. She's written many books--Animal Laws of India and First Aid for Animals to name two. Now more than ever, she needs many hands to help her carry the dharmic torch of nonviolence.

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How to Put an End to A Bloody Tradition

The Mysore workshop offered numerous ways activists in Karnataka, India, can help stop ritual animal sacrifice.

1. Send the animal sacrifice law to all political, civilian and police heads. You can get it through the police or local animal activist groups, like PFA.
2. Link with the movements of farmers, literacy missions, agriculture extension workers, Jains, street plays, etc.
3. Get the dates of all animal sacrifices in your area and plan how to deal with them in advance. Contact your local superintendent of police and file private court cases in advance.
4. Form small activist groups in each village and city.
5. Solicit help from religious groups.
6. Make copies of acts which declare sacrifices unlawful and distribute in newspapers. Take press people to sites of sacrifices. Take photographs yourself and circulate them to the media.

7. Have lawyers bring violators to court. They may not be hardened criminals, but still a big party to offences. There may even be forestry officials who abet sacrifice of wild animals.

8. Ask police to place "public interest" ads in cinemas and newspapers, informing the public that animal sacrifice is forbidden and the penalties for it. If they lag, get a sponsor and run the ads yourself. Sponsors may be private parties or groups of socially-minded citizens like Jains and Rotary Clubs.

9. Write to the Endowment Commissioner asking him to write to each temple. He's in charge of 44,000 temples.

10. In villages where wild animals are killed (by shooting or capture) for animal sacrifice, inform wildlife wardens well in advance. You can plea for confiscation of weapons in that village.

11. Seek amendments in moneylenders' laws to ensure that borrowed money is not used for buying sacrificial animals.

12. Give awards to people who have helped stop animal sacrifices at any level. Get your local member of parliament to distribute the award.