

The Donkey

 Laxmi Prasad Devkota

<https://doi.org/10.3126/litstud.v28i01.39570>

Of all quadrupeds the donkey happens to be the one credited by men with the least amount of animal intelligence. Its very name has become a word of abuse and contempt to be used against a friend or an acquaintance whom you regard as lacking in that degree of understanding that is necessary to a normal social being. The higher castes in India and Nepal do not touch the unintelligent brute and take a purifying bath after an accidental jostling. The worshippers of intellect on our side of the world have graded animals in the order of their brain qualities and put them down accordingly under the category of eatables and uneatable, the adorable and the contemptible. The donkey, like the sow, is the most contemptible and the most untouchable among the four-legged kind. It is positively a chamar or pariah in the hierarchy of animals. My mother, an orthodox Brahmin, accustomed to holy rites and prayers, used to warn me in my childhood against taking the donkey's name early in the morning. She positively believed that a full day's religious merit acquired through pious meditation and prayers would be totally forfeited on hearing the name of that ugly kind. The worship of intelligence carried to a religious pitch produces orthodox abhorrence of that variety. When the washerman's donkey is tinkling its bells along the road, you can see the start of the orthodox pedestrian and the scared expression in the eyes of religious ladies. The very sight is regarded as ominous by those who live by religious signs and symbols.

It sounds rather queer but it is a fact. The Hindu worships the goddess of Wisdom, Saraswati, the Indian Minerva or Pallas Athene, all clothed in white and seated on the back of a spotless lily-white swan. That is the religious symbol of divine and infinite intelligence. But the donkey is the religious symbol of the vehicle of the goddess of epidemics, especially small-pox. I do not know why it has been associated with that particular disease but the dirt and filth, its hirsute ugliness, its want of brains, and its mud-bespattered body must have something to do with that kind of symbol. Where religion controls life and behaviour in detail, certain stereotyped attitudes and habits are formed in relation to men, things and animals. And in Hindudom in particular the donkey has been, I believe, the most contemptible of wretches through the ages. It has received the least measure of sympathy from the masters of the earth.

Well! The donkey may thank the crafty priesthood that worked out an elaborate system of scientific monarchy, controlling patterns of individual behaviour, attitudes and aptitudes in detail. The Brahmin respected intelligence and social utility in respect of animals in general. The shaggy sage of yore might have remarked a hirsute personality in this animal, not unlike his own, but its diminutive size might have led him to the conclusion that, among the quadrupeds, the donkey must have been running down the downward decline in the path of animal evolution. Our mid-Asiatic ancestors,

before their Eastern or Western migration, might have used it for carrying heavy loads for which, in spite of its small size, its capacity is pronounced. But during the days of migration velocity was as important a god as it may be today. For all their prodding and prompting this poor creature must have refused to increase speed and resorted to its habitual tricks of sidling aside or pausing or stopping or holding its head away from the straight line of its intended path. And its refusal to comply, its utter indifference to the sense of the urgency of speed in a wave of migration, must have made them feel that the animal, being as lazy as it was obstinate, had no adequate amount of intelligence to be a human help-mate in the hour of trial. There the religious attitude of contempt must have begun. And this attitude was confirmed, fortified and set by further experiences of our ancestors through the steppes of Asia, the Khaibar and Bolan passes and the waving plains of the Punjabs where they had their first struggles for settlement and survival.

And in the ancient household of the Brahman guru or preceptor, the worst possible pupil, least acquisitive and retentive, began to be called an ass, inviting sneers or giggles or simpering from a large body of eager learners. And the women of the household formed their attitudes. And the versifying sage with his fertile imagination and his sense of facts wrote a religious epic in which he held the animal to contempt and used it as a literary symbol for dullness and stupidity of the worst possible type. And the foreign invaders, Huns, Yuechis, Kushans, Moguls, Pathans, the barbarian hordes of the north-west, hammered at the Aryan gates and the caste rules evolved and untouchability with all its detailed rules and regulations was codified and implemented by the power of the royal sword. This is what my sense of fact and fiction in Hindudom leads me to feel about this strange attitude of repulsion and reprehension practised in my country towards an animal of such carrying capacity and a natural sagacity whom I begin to respect and admire today.

He is the *dhobi's* (washerman's) dearest friend, maintained in his home, and accompanying him on his rounds to various homes for the distribution of heavy loads of washed and ironed costume pieces. I see the loaded animal heavily plodding along but then he is in the working mood which is not, as he knows, the best of moods. One is thinking of the weightage on one's back or perhaps a sore spot thereon, the length of the road, the number of the prodding or the length of the time demanded by the job. The donkey is asinine only when he is put to work too heavy for it. Even then he is not exactly dull. He manifests an intelligence of the subtlest quality to bother, to annoy, to chagrin his master, Man. He may sometimes kick his hind legs in protest or turn his neck wry in sign of displeasure. He finds no language then to vent his grievous vexations. No washerman, he knows, has the intelligence enough to proportion his load to his size. He is loaded, overloaded or unloaded according to the law of human necessity. Animal sympathy is a religious prescription in black and white but the donkey's soul realises full well the falsity of oral professions. He knows he is doomed by

providence to be harnessed to be unfeeling service of unintelligent humanity. And when he is relieved of his load, and finds the congenial warmth of a sunshiny day, and a rich growth of young grass on the *dhobi's* pasture, he finds an outlet for his spirit, sending himself hilariously into loud guffaws of "Hee hee haw" at the asininity of humanity who brand him habitually as the stupidest of fellows!

In spite of the spirit of meek submission imposed on him by coercion he retains a marked individuality which I have felt to be worthy of respect. You may beat him, scold him, prod him, pinch him, mortify him but you cannot make him admit the wisdom of humanity and of human ways. He is the most sceptical of philosophers, and cannot bring himself to believe in a single word in your tomes, in a single hope of your social progress. He knows you are all donkeys in your own sense of the term. He knows that the civilisation that you boast of is merely an artificial culture of your own that is taking you farther and farther away from Nature to a dangerous height. He positively believes that it must collapse some day. He has subconscious sense of Greece, Babylon and Rome, of Aztec and of Egypt. His sense of the immortality of grass and herbs as ever recurrent growths in Nature makes him twinkle his eyes at the mention of the names of all manufactured goods, including art and literature. He regards your big houses and palaces as merely dangerous fabrics awaiting a quake of high intensity in this volcanic region. And as for religion he has the strongest of contempts, most probably because he is a long afflicted victim. To ask the creator for a sense of good and bad, right and wrong, was the most stupid mistake a human being could make. This sense in its natural and healthy character could not be so very dangerous, however, as the artificial sense of virtues and vices developed by an interested religion. The fanatic, according to his way of thinking, must blind himself in relation to the facts of life and nature, and unthinkingly plunge headlong into the quagmire or the hell-fire of an established belief or a conventional creed. The high priest manufactures detailed rules and regulations for the guidance of conduct as well as of thought, and makes hair splitting distinctions between modes of good and evil! The result is a total loss of individuality in the conforming animal! The human being goes into hell for all his defects of omission as well as commission, and their number is proportioned to the number of rules and regulations prescribed in that respect. But the donkey is free from these dangers. The philosopher intelligently winked at me and said, "Don't you think that over-thinking itself constitutes a danger for your race? You say you are developing your brains, acquiring knowledge, and immortalising it in print. But thought is dangerous energy. It has led to big wars, revolutions, struggles. It has created dangerous weapons of annihilation. You are aware of that danger. Yet there is a greater one of which you have no idea. A human head may manufacture so much of thought and speculation inside it that the full energy of one's life may be either the cause of one's own total disruption or that of one's race, especially in the field of religious wars or spiritual conflicts." I had only a slight sense of that

before my interview with the donkey.

There was indeed such a glorious measure of nature faith in that animal that almost spoke intelligently and audibly to me as made me feel ashamed of myself! I felt stupid as well as guilty before its natural sagacity. A human being could feel foolish in its presence for all the hard labour of the sun-scorched fields, for all the trammels of modern civilisation and for all the complex and asinine casuistries of creeds and systems in deadly conflict for insignificant hair splitting in point of form and belief. We build our intellectual or religious fabrics so dangerously high in cloudland that we run the risk of toppling over with all our tall heads. And if we could follow the ass for our preceptor, our consciences could rest easier, our heavy heads lighter, our loaded and tortured minds free and healthier? Where seekers of grass may revel in sunny pastures, seekers of the spirit may writhe in well-fire without rhyme or reason. The donkey stimulated the spirit of interrogation in me. Have I not taken too large a dose of religious opium to be a normal animal before such a benevolent mother as Nature? Have I not become too false a purist, acquiescing in a socio-economic system of religious exploitation where the cobwebs of priestly Taney must utterly annihilate the human conscience and the human individuality? Preserving purity in form while destroying it in spirit? Have I not thought too much of spirit and matter to make myself an utter wreckage, harmful to myself as well as to my kind? Have I not created purgatories in my own mind out of my own casuistries? And these questions and the trail of reflections that followed them made me conclude that the donkey was an animal far superior to myself in intelligence, at least, in some respects. And I could realise why priests hated it and the purists; and why it so loudly demonstrated its uproarious "Hee! Hee! Haw!"

