

End to cattle curbs: on withdrawal of sale ban

Good sense appears to have prevailed at last. With a fresh set of draft rules to replace last year's poorly conceived ones, the Centre has sought to [withdraw the ban on sale of cattle for slaughter](#) in animal markets. The draft rules are now open for comments and suggestions. When the Union Ministry for Environment, Forests and Climate Change notified the rules under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act on May 23, 2017, there was concern that in the name of preventing cruelty to animals and regulating livestock markets the government was surreptitiously throttling the cattle trade and furthering the BJP's cow protection agenda. The rules were criticised for restricting legitimate animal trade and interfering with dietary habits. The new draft makes a welcome departure from the earlier rules, seeking to provide great relief to buyers of animals from cumbersome paperwork and procedural requirements. Some distance-specific conditions to curb inter-State and cross-border movement of animals are to be dropped, as also rules barring animal markets within 25 km of a State border and 50 km of the international boundary. The definition of 'animal markets' will no more include any lairage adjoining a slaughter-house, thereby removing curbs on the sale of animals in a resting place in the vicinity of a market. The draft retains good provisions in the earlier notification barring cruelty in the treatment and transport of animals.

The notification had set off a storm last year, with some Chief Ministers stridently opposing it on the ground that regulating livestock trade was essentially a State subject. Even assuming that the Centre had jurisdiction under the law against animal cruelty to notify the rules, it was obvious that only the States could enforce them. With the Supreme Court expanding a stay granted by the Madras High Court into a nation-wide bar on the rules, and some States taking a clear stand that they would not implement the regulations, the notification was a non-starter. There was further concern whether the regulations would adversely impact poor villagers, as animal markets are predominantly in the countryside. There was an impression that under the guise of stiff regulations, the Centre was making it impossible for cattle, a term that covers cows, buffalo, bulls and camels, to be slaughtered even for food, despite the PCA Act recognising explicitly that animals can be food for humans. The meat trade, valued at thousands of crores of rupees, would have suffered a serious setback had the rules been implemented. Any transformation from a tendency to advance pet causes to an approach based on economic and legal considerations would be a welcome change. Good governance is not only about regulating human and economic activities, but also about avoiding perceptions of sectarianism.

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