

A good rollback

The Centre's decision to redraft the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Market) Rules is welcome. Notified in May last year, the rules required a cattle-seller in a livestock market to furnish a written declaration stating that the animal "was not being sold for slaughter". They also prohibited a person who had purchased cattle from such a market from selling the animal for slaughter. The notification was opposed by farmers because it went against the usual practice of bringing aged bovines to livestock markets from where they would be transported for sale to slaughter houses. The new rules being drafted by the law ministry try to address their concerns. They have done away with the requirement to certify that the animal is not meant for slaughter. They only say: "No unfit animal or young animal shall be sold in an animal market and... no person shall permit an animal to be offered or displayed for sale in an animal market if it is likely to give birth."

The government initially justified the 2017 rules on the ground that disallowing livestock markets to trade in animals for slaughter would make no difference to the abattoirs and meat processors. It argued that slaughter houses could get their supplies straight from the farms while the livestock markets would deal only in animals meant for milch and agricultural purposes. However, unlike in the West, livestock markets in India do not display a pronounced distinction between cattle meant for agricultural purposes and those headed for slaughter houses. Farmers in the country rear cattle for milk till the animals are about nine years old and then sell them for slaughter. The buyer, who then sells these spent animals to the slaughter houses, is actually doing the farmers a favour by not only buying the bovines but also saving them the cost of fodder and labour resources that can be used for animals that yield milk.

The new rules, drafted by the Centre, are more in tune with the realities of the rural economy. But with some states striving to outdo each other in demonising the cattle trade, their efficacy could be anybody's guess. Last year, for example, Gujarat stipulated a life sentence as the maximum punishment under the state's Animal Preservation (Amendment) Act. This month, Rajasthan's Bovine Animals (Prohibition of Slaughter and Regulation of Export) Act acquired a section under which a "competent officer" can now delegate the power of arresting a person accused of smuggling cattle to a "nominated official" — a troubling provision in a milieu in which boundaries between a crackdown on illicit cattle trafficking and cow vigilantism have become porous and reports of the state police actually incriminate the victims of such attacks. It's no coincidence, then, that the Rajasthan animal husbandry department's data shows a 90 per cent fall in sales in cattle fairs in the state last year, compared to 2012.

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