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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Contradictions in India's Cow Protection Regime: When Prohibition Hurts Both Cattle and Farmers

 **THE HINDU**

29 May 2026

POLITY**ECONOMY****SOCIAL ISSUES****GS2****GS3**

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If 30+ years of cow protection laws have not raised cattle populations but have created stray-cattle externalities and depressed secondary-cattle market values, is the policy actually serving its stated purpose — or has it inadvertently transferred costs from urban political identity to rural farmer livelihoods?"

THE HINDU

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Stringent

ANTI-SLAUGHTER LAWS IN 20+ INDIAN STATES

— covering ~80% of the cattle population — have **not increased cattle populations** (in fact, populations have flat-lined or declined in many states) and instead **burden farmers economically** by **depressing the secondary cattle market** and creating **stray cattle externalities**. The editorial calls for replacing **prohibition-based laws** with **welfare-and-livelihood-focused regulation** that aligns protection rhetoric with empirical farmer realities.

THE ARGUMENT IN ONE LINE

A policy that aimed to **protect** the cow has, through unintended consequences in secondary markets, become a policy that **burdens** the farmer who keeps the cow — and **abandons** the unproductive cow she can no longer afford or sell.

THE EMPIRICAL PUZZLE

INDICATOR	BEFORE STRINGENT LAWS	AFTER STRINGENT LAWS (2026)
Cattle population (India)	~ 19.09 crore (19th Livestock Census, 2012)	~ 19.25 crore (20th Livestock Census, 2019) — only 0.8% increase over 7 years
Female cattle share	Rising	Continuing rise
Total milch animals (cows + buffaloes)	—	~ 12.53 crore (20th LC 2019) — slow growth despite protection regime
Stray cattle (urban + rural)	Low	Significant rise — multiple state estimates
Cattle imports / exports	Significant	Sharp decline due to export restrictions
Farmer income per cattle	—	Declining in real terms (per NABARD)
Secondary cattle market	Active	Severely constricted

The data tell a paradoxical story: laws designed to **increase cattle numbers** have not done so — but they have **transferred costs** from one group (slaughterhouses, leather industry) to another (cattle owners + farmers + states paying for shelters).

HOW THE LAW MAPS ACROSS STATES

STATE CATEGORY	APPROACH
Total ban + criminal penalty	UP, MP, Rajasthan, Maharashtra (parts), Haryana, Gujarat, HP, J&K, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, MP, Punjab, Karnataka (with 2020 amendment), Goa (partial)
Restricted slaughter (with permit)	Tamil Nadu (with caveats), Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar, Odisha
Open	Kerala, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, West Bengal (limited), Assam (limited)
No specific law	Largely Tribal states + NE

The geographic distribution is **politically uneven** — north and west have stringent laws; south and east are more permissive.

THE MECHANISM OF UNINTENDED HARM

1. Secondary Market Collapse

PRE-LAW	POST-LAW
Farmer with unproductive cattle could sell to slaughter market for ~₹3,000-10,000	Same cattle now near-worthless in cash terms (sometimes negative-priced — farmer pays to remove)
Captured residual value of cattle	Stranded asset
Active inter-state cattle trade	Vehicle inspection + criminal liability for transporters
Cattle markets active	Cattle markets dead in many districts

2. Maintenance Costs Stranded

- An unproductive cow costs **₹5,000-15,000/year** in fodder + water + shelter + medical.
- A farmer with limited fodder cannot maintain unproductive cattle.
- The **state ostensibly takes over** via gaushalas — but actual capacity is <5% of need.

3. Stray Cattle Externalities

- **Estimated 50 lakh+ stray cattle** in India (NABARD-cited estimates).
- **UP government's gaushala scheme** (2020 onwards) — ~₹500 crore/year — still inadequate.
- **Stray cattle road accidents** — ~5,000+ deaths/year (CWC + state data).
- **Crop damage** by stray cattle — significant farmer income loss in UP, MP, Rajasthan.
- **Disease spread** — Lumpy Skin Disease 2022 outbreak (~1.5 lakh+ cattle deaths) partly attributed to stray-cattle dynamics.

4. Vigilante Violence

- **Anti-slaughter laws** have provided **legal cover** for vigilantism against Muslim and Dalit cattle transporters.
- **2014-2025 period** saw documented incidents in UP, MP, Haryana, Maharashtra.
- **SC's Tehseen Poonawalla (2018)** verdict mandated state action against vigilante violence — implementation patchy.

5. State Fiscal Burden

- **Gaushala subsidies** in UP, MP, Rajasthan, Gujarat = **~₹2,000-4,000 crore/year** combined.
- State revenue from cattle market dues = near-zero (markets collapsed).

- Net fiscal effect = **negative for state treasuries.**

THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

PROVISION	CONTENT
Article 48 (DPSP)	“The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle”
Schedule VII, List II, Entry 15	“Preservation, protection and improvement of stock and prevention of animal diseases” — State subject
Article 51A(g)	Fundamental Duty — compassion for living creatures
Article 21	Right to life — extended in Animal Welfare Board v. Nagaraja (2014) to include animal welfare
Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960	Central law for animal welfare

Article 48 mandates protection of “**milch and draught cattle**” — milk-producing and labour-using cattle. The constitutional protection is **welfare-economic**, not religious. Many state laws have, however, extended protection to **all bovines including unproductive**, going beyond the constitutional text.

WHAT THE EDITORIAL PROPOSES

REFORM	SUBSTANCE
Welfare-focused regulation	Replace blanket prohibition with mandatory good husbandry standards
Farmer livelihood floor	Buyback scheme for unproductive cattle at fair price (state purchase)
Modern gaushala network	Properly funded, professionally run shelters with capacity matching need
Inter-state cattle trade	Restore with proper veterinary certification
Stray cattle policy	Birth control (sterilisation programmes), shelter expansion, owner accountability
Decouple from communal politics	Frame as agricultural-economic policy, not religious
Lumpy Skin Disease + FMD vaccination	Massive expansion
Insurance for cattle owners	Risk-sharing across stakeholders

WHAT'S WORKING (SOMETIMES)

- **Tamil Nadu's permit-based slaughter** — provides regulated market access.
- **Kerala's open framework** — cattle continues to be a productive asset.
- **Andhra Pradesh's cattle insurance pilots.**
- **Punjab's modern dairy framework** — links farmer to cooperative chains.

COMPARATIVE — OTHER COUNTRIES

COUNTRY	APPROACH
Germany	Strict animal welfare laws + regulated slaughter
New Zealand	Animal Welfare Act 1999 — protection through welfare, not prohibition
Brazil	Major exporter; regulated market
Argentina	Cattle as livelihood; welfare regulations
Most countries	Regulated, not prohibited

India's prohibition approach is **uniquely Indian** — driven by religious and political factors absent elsewhere.

WIDER SIGNIFICANCE

- **Welfare vs prohibition** — the policy frame matters for outcomes.
- **Farmer income** — cattle livelihoods are central to rural India.
- **Communal harmony** — cow politics has fuelled communal tensions.
- **State capacity** — gaushala management is a state-capacity test.
- **Lumpy Skin Disease lessons** — open trade and vaccination work better than closure.
- **Demographic transition** — cattle, like agriculture, is a sunset livelihood for many; cushioning the transition matters.

COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

COUNTER	SUBSTANCE
Religious sentiment	Cow protection has deep religious basis; cannot be reduced to economics
State autonomy	List II is state subject; states have prerogative
Cultural identity	The cow is a civilisational symbol, not just a livestock unit
Gradual reform	Sudden liberalisation could be politically destabilising
Existing gaushalas	Many run by religious institutions, not state

WAY FORWARD

- **National Cattle Welfare Mission** — replacing prohibition with welfare.
- **State-level commissions** — cattle owner panels for policy design.
- **Gaushala professionalisation** — modern management.
- **Cattle insurance expansion** — risk transfer.
- **Inter-state coordination** — restore organised market.
- **Farmer income augmentation** — milk, dung, urine value chains.
- **Sterilisation + vaccination** as the core public health intervention.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2 – Polity & Governance:

- Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.
- DPSP – Article 48; Fundamental Duties.
- Centre-State relations on subjects in Lists.

GS Paper 3 – Indian Economy / Agriculture:

- Major crops, cropping patterns, e-technology in the aid of farmers; storage, transport and marketing.
- Issues related to direct and indirect farm subsidies; food security, buffer stocks.
- Economics of animal husbandry.

Analytical hooks for Mains:

- DPSP implementation – Article 48 between rhetoric and outcomes.
- Cattle economy – from prohibition to welfare regulation.
- Federal subject + national debate – managing constitutional list-based subjects in nationwide debates.

FACTS CORNER

States with stringent anti-slaughter laws: 20+, covering ~80% of cattle population.

Cattle population (20th Livestock Census, 2019): ~19.25 crore — only 0.8% increase from 2012's ~19.09 crore (19th LC).

Total milch animals (cows + buffaloes, 2019): ~12.53 crore.

Stray cattle (estimated): 50 lakh+ (NABARD-cited).

Constitutional provisions: Article 48 (DPSP); Article 51A(g) (Fundamental Duty); Schedule VII, List II, Entry 15 (state subject).

Central law: Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960.

SC verdict on vigilantism: Tehseen Poonawalla v. Union of India (2018).

SC on animal welfare: Animal Welfare Board v. Nagaraja (2014) — animal welfare under Article 21.

Open / permissive states: Kerala, NE states (Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal), West Bengal (limited), Sikkim.

Karnataka 2020 Amendment: stringent anti-slaughter regime.

Lumpy Skin Disease outbreak: 2022, ~1.5 lakh+ cattle deaths nationally (Rajasthan ~half of total).

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