The Asu tribe’s obsession with racs

An Indian anthropologist, Chandra Thapar, made a study of foreign cultures with customs similar to those of his native land. One culture in particular fascinated him because it revered one animal as sacred - much as the people in India revere the cow. The things that he discovered might interest you. The tribe Dr. Thapar studied is called the Asu and is found on the North American continent to the north of the Terahmare of Mexico. Though the Asu seem to be a highly developed society in some ways, they are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the care and feeding of the rac - an animal much like the bull in size, strength, and temperament.

In the Asu tribe, it is almost a social obligation to own at least one rac. Anyone who owns none is held in low esteem by the community because he is too poor to maintain one of these beasts properly. To display their wealth and social prestige, a few very rich members of the tribe even own herds of rac. Unfortunately, the rac breed is not very healthy, and individual animals generally do not live more than 10-12 years. Each family invests large sums of money each year to keep its rac healthy and shod, for it has a tendency to throw its shoes often.

There are rac specialists in each community - often more than one if the community is particularly wealthy. These specialists, however, due to the long period of ritual training they must undergo and due to the difficulty of obtaining the right selection of charms to treat the rac, demand costly offerings whenever a tribesman must treat his ailing rac. At the age of 16, young men and women in many Asu communities generally undergo a puberty rite in which the rac figures prominently. The youths must petition a high priest in a grand temple. They are then initiated into the ceremonies that surround the care of the rac and is permitted to keep the rac.

Although the rac may be used as a beast of burden, it has many habits which other cultures would consider detrimental to the life of the society. In the first place, the rac breed is increasing at a very rapid rate, and the Asu tribesmen have given no thought to curbing the rac population. As a consequence, the Asu must dedicate more space for this creature.  Besides fields in which to keep their rac, the Asu must build special paths for the rac to travel on, since its delicate health necessitates smooth paths without rocks or holes which could cause the valuable animal to trip or throw a shoe.

As the work of smoothing the rac paths is too much for one villager to undertake, it has become a community project, and each tribesman must pay an annual tithe to build new rac paths and maintain the old.  The Asu community may even ask villagers to move their homes in order to accommodate a new rac path. Dr. Thapar also noted that, unlike the excrement of a cow (which many in his country hold sacred), that of the rac cannot be used as either fuel or fertilizer. On the contrary, rac excrement is exceptionally foul and totally useless. Worst of all, the rac is prone to rampages in which it runs down anything in its path, much like stampeding cattle. Estimates are that the rac kill thousands of Asu in a year.

Despite the high cost of its upkeep, the damage it does to the land, and its penchant for destructive rampages, the Asu still regard the rac as essential to the survival of their culture. A member of the “panchayat” (village council) in Chandra Thapar’s home village has had some experience with the planned parenthood campaign in rural India. He suggests that the only rational thing for the Asu to do is to begin a program of birth control for the rac. He thinks his village should send a technical assistance team to advise the Asu on limiting the rac population. He feels that comparing the rac with the so-called sacred cow of India is inappropriate since the cow contributes so much more to Indian life while the rac kills, maims, and upsets the life and environment of the Asu.