

THE IMPLICATION OF COWS IN INDIAN CIVILIZATION

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Abstract : Cows are still considered religious to the people of the Hindu faith across the Indian subcontinent. In this paper, the authors discuss details of the religious, historical, economic, cultural and sociological significance of the holy cow in Hinduism. The authors also suggest options to use the sacred cow for the enhancement of eco-friendly living in India in the near future.

In this paper, we discuss the sociological, cultural and religious implications involving the sacred cow in Hindu society in India. We also suggest some strategies for the potential future use of sacred cows to enhance eco-friendly living in India.

Keywords: Hinduism, cow protection, religion, culture, economy, society, India

Introduction : The Hindu religion identifies the rights of animals to co-exist with humans; therefore, people are taught to love, nurture and worship them. The religion promotes the belief that various Hindu gods and goddesses incarnate in various animal forms. In the past, kings and emperors used various species of animals in their emblems to show their respect. Many festivals in India are still being celebrated related to different animals.

From a source of milk to a provider of labour and religious inspiration, cows often play a prominent role in Hindu society. To the population of 900 million Hindus spread across the Indian sub-continent and elsewhere, the cow is a holy animal that cannot be harmed. The faith first evolved near the Indus River valley nearly 3,000 years ago; respecting the cow remains a central theme in the daily lives of the Hindu faith even today. Many scholars say early Hindus ate beef, but ultimately came to see the cow as sacred to be esteemed and not eaten. India's legendary leader of the nonviolence movement, Mahatma Gandhi stated, 'If someone asks me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protection'.

The Mythical Cow :

The cow is the most holy of all the animals of Hinduism. It is known as *Kamadhenu* and the giver of all desires. According to myth, she emerged from the ocean of milk at the time of *samudramanthan* or the great mixing of the ocean by the gods and demons. She was presented to the seven sages, and in the course of time came into the guardianship of sage *Vasishtha*, the teacher of Ram. Her legs represent four Vedas such as her nipples four *Purushartha*, her horns symbolize the gods, her face the sun and moon, and her shoulders *agnior* the god of fire. She has also been described in four other forms: *Nanda*, *Sunanda*, *Surabhi*, *Susheela* and *Sumana*. Legends also state that Brahma gave life to priests and cows same time so that the priests could narrate religious scriptures while cows could afford ghee as offering in rituals. Anyone who kills cows or allows others to kill them is deemed to decay in hell as many years as there are hairs upon his body. Likewise, the bull is depicted as a vehicle of Lord Shiva: a symbol of respect for the male cattle. The *Nandi* (bull) located at the Shiva temples at Thanjavur, Rameshwaram and Mahabalipuram are the most venerated bovine shrines in the Tamil Nadu State of southern India. Similarly, large numbers of pilgrims also visit the 16th century bull temple at Bangalore (Karnataka State) and 11th century Nandi temple at Kajuraho (Madhya Pradesh State). The Vishwanath temple of Jhansi built in 1002 AD also harbours a large bull. The cow was revered as a mother goddess in the Mediterranean civilizations. The cow became celebrated in India, first during the Vedic period (1500–900 BCE) as a symbol of wealth. Bulls were sacrificed to the gods, and people ate their meat. Nonetheless, the slaughter of milk-producing cows was prohibited. The *Rig ved* refers to the cow as *Devi* or goddess. Although meat-eating was permitted in the Vedic period, the scriptures encouraged vegetarianism. An example is the Laws of Manu, which states that there is no sin in eating meat, but abstention brings great rewards. In the Mahabharata, *Bhishma* observes that the cow acts as a surrogate mother by providing milk

to human beings for a lifetime, so she is truly the mother of the world. The *Puranas* state that nothing is more religious than the gift of cows. In the classic *Ramayana*, *Rama* was given a dowry of many cows when he married *Sita*. The sanctity of cow may have been based on economic reasons. During the Vedic period, cattle played a significant source of wealth for the predominant pastoral communities, which is similar to the *Masai* tribe in East Africa today. The five key “products” of the cow include milk, curds, ghee butter, urine and dung; they are used in daily lives, worship and rituals. Cows provide milk that helps to sustain lives of adults and children. The milk by-products such as buttermilk, butter, and ghee are an integral part of people’s daily diet in India. Cow dung is widely used for fuel in rural areas; people also use the dung to clean house floors and walls; cow dung has been scientifically proven to have antiseptic value. Hindus do not share the Western repulsion towards cow excrement, but instead consider it a natural beneficial product. Being tame, cattle are an excellent beast of burden; they pull carts, and plough the field to plant crops. Even after death, their skins are useful to human.

The conflict between holiness and economic use of cows in modern India

The cow remains a revered and protected animal in Hinduism today and people of the Hindu faith refrain from eating beef. Most rural families across India have at least one dairy cow. Despite their sacred status, cows do not appear to be much appreciated in the day-to-day lives of people in India. For example, they roam around city streets where they have to rely on garbage from gutters for survival. Recent report indicates that large numbers of cows in major cities die due to eating plastic bags. In some places, it is considered good luck to give a cow some snack, bread or fruit before breakfast. A person can be sent to jail for killing or injuring a cow as per the animal protection law. However, as most of India’s cities have been overcrowded in recent decades, cow-friendly attitudes and policies have posed some problems. Cows are honoured across India at least once a year known as *Gopastami* cow holiday; they are washed and decorated in the temple and given offerings with the hope that their gifts of life to humanity will continue. Nonetheless, animal activists complain that cows are being harmed during transportation to slaughterhouses after long and torturous journeys in trains and trucks or on foot. It is illegal to transport them across state lines. India’s USD 2 billion leather export industry depends on 4,000 tanneries and leather-goods factories scattered across the nation; they depend on cattle. Therefore, the government overlooks the sacredness of the cow and continues to promote the leather trade. Animal activists suggest that lifting the ban on slaughter may deter the deadly illegal transport across state lines because poor villagers can no longer afford to keep unproductive cows, and suppressing it may cause greater misery. However, such a drastic step may provoke anger of the cow-lovers of India, so politicians will avoid making any statements that might upset them.

Religious leaders of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity voiced their unity for cow protection. The gathering included leading saints and scholars namely *Shankaracharya* (leader of Hindu monasteries of *Advaita*), *Baba Ramdev* (yoga guru), *Swami Dayanand Saraswati* (renowned *Vedanta* scholar and saint), *Mohanrao Bhagwat* (leader of *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*), *Jain Muni Pavitra Sagarji Maharaj* (Jain sect leader), *Ashok Singhal* (leader of *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*), *Bhante Gyan Jagatji* (Buddhist saint), *Bhadant Rahul Bodhiji* (Buddhist saint), *Maulana Bashir Qadri* (Islamic leader), *Haji Taiyab Qureshiji* (Islamic leader), *Swami Sahdev Das* (*Krishna Consciousness Society*), and *Suresh Oberoi* (renowned actor). They unanimously urged the government of India to impose a ban on cow slaughter throughout India by enacting a law in parliament and also recognize the cow as India’s national animal.

In fact, India already has a national animal, the tiger, and the national bird is peacock or peafowl. Accordingly, declaring the cow as a national domestic animal appears to be reasonable. However, whether the government will agree to the appeals of religious leaders and scholars has yet to be seen. Critics argue on the other hand that such a proposal would undermine India’s commitment to religious tolerance and secularism, although cow protection has the support of leading saints and religious leaders from all sects.

Future non-conflicting green energy potential of cows

India covers the largest domesticated bovine population in the world that includes cows, bullocks, buffalo and calves. Based on the mean annual average dung yield (fresh weight) of 4.5 kg/day for cattle and 10.2 kg/day for buffalo, the total dung production is estimated to be 659 tons annually, with cattle dung accounting for 344 tons and buffalo dung accounting for 315 tons. Only about 40% of the dung is used as fuel in rural areas. The quantity of dung used annually in the existing 2.7 million family type biogas plants is estimated to be 22 tons. Biogas is a method of producing methane gas from organic matter. It can be used by rural people as fuel for cooking food items, with less impact on forest ecology. The biogas technology harnesses the natural process by creating an artificial environment via a biogas plant, which provides conditions for natural bacterial action leading to methane gas production. The digested organic matter “slurry” is removed by an outlet, which can be used as a natural fertilizer for crops. The impact of household biogas plants in sustainable development is yet to be fully realized in rural India. Firewood collected from forest areas still serves as the main fuel consumed in India and peoples’ dependency on firewood has serious detrimental effect on the local ecology due to the unsustainable removal of natural forest vegetation. Energy use projections indicate that India’s rural communities will continue to use bio-fuel (firewood, dried dung, and biogas) while urban areas will switch to LPG, kerosene and electricity. After the biogas plants were established in villages, the need for chemical fertilizers reduced, and farmers were seen increasingly using the organic slurry as natural fertilizer for crops, which enhances topsoil health in agricultural areas promoting healthy agricultural and terrestrial ecosystems in villages. The organic manure helps in retaining soil fertility and productivity, especially in the ecologically fragile dry lands of western India

Conclusion : To overcome the degradation of natural resources in developing countries such as India, with a population of over one billion inhabitants, is not all that easy. Therefore, it is about time for India’s religious leaders, politicians and policy makers to relook into the availability of millions of cows across India so that religiously non-conflicting strategies can be promoted towards sustainable development in rural areas. Wandering cows can be rescued and rehabilitated at government/corporate-managed ranches where their dung can be harvested daily to promote cost-effective biogas technology. Such ranches can serve not only as animal shelters but also as educational centers to promote public awareness on cows, Hinduism, renewable energy, rural economy and sustainable development. When the energy potential of the cow dung is fully realized in the country, people will not allow their cattle to roam aimlessly on the streets. Furthermore, the alternative renewable energy source of cow dung will significantly reduce pressure on India’s forests, soil and associated terrestrial ecosystems, ultimately mitigating global warming while enhancing ecological conservation. If the above proposed suggestions are implemented, the Indian society can resolve two issues: cows can continue to remain to be worshiped and they can at the same time be economically useful. This contemporary animal-friendly developmental approach will bring religion and economy closer once again.

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