

The significance of cows in Indian society between sacredness and economy

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Abstract

Cows are still considered holy to the people of the Hindu faith across the Indian sub-continent. In this paper, the authors discuss details of the religious, historical, economic, cultural and sociological significance of the sacred 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.

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

Introduction

The Hindu religion recognises 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 to honour different animals (Agoramoorthy & Hsu 2006).

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 said, 'If someone asks me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow protection' (Gandhi 1927).

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.

Sacred animals of Hinduism

The Hindu religion generally considers all life forms as sacred, and various species ranging from the tiny insect to gigantic elephant are regarded as equally sacred (Agoramoorthy 2009a). The long list of sacred animals mentioned in the ancient Sanskrit scriptures cover major taxa, including invertebrates (bee, butterfly, mollusc, spider), fish, reptiles (crocodile, lizard, snake, squirrel, turtle), birds (eagle, falcon, crow, crane, goose, hawk, owl, peacock, swan, dove), and mammals (bat, bear, wild boar, buffalo, bull, cat, cow, dog, deer, elephant, fox, goat, horse, leopard, lion, monkey, rat, tiger, rabbit). Moreover, Hinduism has developed sanctity by association for animals such as the swan, eagle and bull that serve as the vehicles of the principal Hindu deities, namely *Brahma*, the creator, and *Vishnu*, the protector, *Shiva*, the regenerator: all three make up the trinity of Hindu Gods. Some of the animals are sacred themselves, such as *Hanuman*, the monkey God, *Naga*, the snake God, and *Ganesh*, the elephant God. Major Hindu temples across India still maintain captive elephants, since they play a role in religious rituals (Majupuria 2000).

The concept of the reincarnation of Vishnu is intriguing, since it represents in a way the theory of organic evolution involving animals. In order to indicate the aquatic origin of the life forms, Vishnu incarnates in the form of *Mathsya* (fish), followed by an amphibious *Kurma* (turtle). The next incarnation *Varaha* or wild boar is a terrestrial mammal, depicting how life transferred from the aquatic habitat to the terrestrial environment. Subsequently, *Narasimha* represents a beast's attempt to attain a human form, which is followed by *Vamana*, a pigmy human. In the incarnation of *Ramachandra*, perfect human qualities are identified, while the last one, *Kalki*, represents the human destruction of the planet giving poor attention to nature (Haigh 2006).

Several mythical stories are associated with the sacred animals of India; for example, the eagle is worshiped while pigeons are the favourite animals of *Yamaraja*, the god of death. He rides on a bull water-buffalo when he visits Earth. *Karthikeya*, the younger son of *Shiva* uses peacock for his transportation while the goddess *Saraswati*, who possesses the powers of speech and wisdom rides a swan. The crow is unique among birds as well since it is well-versed with the happenings in heaven, so people with desires towards paradise try to please it. The deer is associated with many mythical stories as well; *Vayu*, the air god's chariot is pulled by a pair of deer; *Indra*, the ruler of the heavens employs *Ucchishrava*, a snow white seven-headed flying horse as his vehicle. Similarly, the Sun god's chariot is being pulled by seven red horses (Waghorne 1999). Prehistoric animals such as the crocodile are also given importance in the religion. It is believed that the river Ganges depends on a crocodile for her frequent visits to the Bay of Bengal from the Himalayas. Moreover, the mythical elephant story is well-known: when an elephant named *Gajendra* was attacked by a crocodile while crossing a river, it screamed for God's help, and Vishnu appeared on his vehicle, *Garuda* (eagle) and destroyed the hungry reptile.

Although there are 238 species of snakes throughout India, it is only the cobra with its two-eyed hood that is worshipped widely. The worship of snakes in India is intriguing. *Adiseshha*, the king of snakes is the couch of *Narayana*, a form of Vishnu as he lies on the ocean. The snake can be seen around the neck of *Shiva*, the Hindu supreme God.

Furthermore, snakes made of stone are found throughout most of the Hindu temples in India. In the western state of Maharashtra, a celebration called *Naag-Panchami* is specifically devoted to the worship of cobras. Similarly, snake worship is called *Jhampan* in the eastern state of West Bengal (Gupta 2006).

The mythical cow

The cow is the most sacred of all the animals of Hinduism. It is known as *Kamadhenu*, or the divine cow, and the giver of all desires. According to legend, she emerged from the ocean of milk at the time of *samudramanathan* or the great churning of the ocean by the gods and demons. She was presented to the seven sages, and in the course of time came into the custody of sage *Vasishta*, the teacher of Ram (hero of the epic Ramayana). Her legs symbolise four Vedas; her nipples four *Purushartha* (or objectives, i.e. *dharma* or righteousness, *artha* or material wealth, *kama* or desire and *moksha* or salvation); her horns symbolise the gods, her face the sun and moon, and her shoulders *agni* or the god of fire. She has also been described in four other forms: *Nanda*, *Sunanda*, *Surabhi*, *Susheela* and *Sumana* (Ganapathi 2005).

Legends also state that Brahma gave life to priests and cows same time so that the priests could recite religious scriptures while cows could afford ghee (clarified butter) as offering in rituals. Anyone who kills cows or allows others to kill them is deemed to rot 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 (Ganapathi 2005).

The cow was revered as a mother goddess in the Mediterranean civilisations. 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 veda* 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 (Buhler 1964). In the Mahabharata, *Bhishma* (grandfather of the leaders of warring factions) 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 epic Ramayana, *Rama* was given a dowry of many cows when he married *Sita* (Dutt 2009).

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 yoghurt, 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 sacredness and economic use of cows in contemporary 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 (McNamee 2009). 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. For example, Delhi city's 13 million people have to share the streets with 40,000 cows, often leading to complaints, since they spread trash by ripping garbage bags; they also dangerously snarl traffic. Consequently, officials have employed cowboys to round up the roaming cows to move them outside city limits, sometimes to special reserves where they are cared for. Although city leaders may not give up until the vast majority of the cows are moved out, sceptics argue that some of the cows return to their home turfs within days of being moved (Chomchuen 2009).

Cows are honoured across India at least once a year known as *Gopastami* or 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 abused during transportation to slaughterhouses after long and torturous journeys in trains and trucks or on foot. Slaughtering cows is permitted in two states: West Bengal in the east and Kerala in the south. 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.

Prominent spiritual leaders in India have recently led a long march on foot from the town of Kuruksetra (land of teachers) where Lord *Krishna* (a manifestation of Vishnu) spoke the gospel of *Bhagavad Gita* (song of God and message of spiritual wisdom). Many people joined the 25,000 km walk over a period of 108 days from 30 September 2009 to 17 January 2010 that went across India to convey a message: 'Saving cows is saving India's soul.' According to legend, Kuruksetra was the site where *Brahma* created the universe, and where the book of Manu was written, which contains all the knowledge related to the creation of the universe (Buhler 1964).

On the last day, religious leaders of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity voiced their unity for cow protection. The gathering included leading saints and scholars namely Sharkarcharya (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 recognise the cow as India's national animal (Dasa 2009).

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. Nevertheless, 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.

For example, the Islamic leader, Maulana Bashir Qadri, stated that if cow slaughter is to be banned only with the signatures of the Muslims and the cow to be declared as national animal, then millions of Muslims will come forward to support it. He appealed to Muslims in India to support the cow protection initiative.

Similarly, Baba Ramdev said that until 1760, there had been a total ban in India on cow slaughter, prostitution and drinking alcohol. However, with the advent of the British rule, the forbidden practices of Hinduism were given the legal status by Robert Clive (British colonial administrator). As a result, there are 36,000 slaughter houses and 32,000 liquor shops across India today. He reiterated that to save future generations, returning to the lifestyle of Hindu ancestors and adhering to righteous ways of life in society is essential (Dasa 2009).

Future non-conflicting green energy potential of cows

India harbours the largest domesticated bovine population (294 million) in the world that includes cows, bullocks, buffalo and calves (Ravindranath et al. 2000; Tata Energy Research Institute 1997). 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 (India's Animal Husbandry 1997). 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 fertiliser for crops.

The potential for household biogas units in India is 12 to 17 million. However, only 4 million biogas plants were installed by 2011. Thus, the impact of household biogas plants in sustainable development is yet to be fully realised in rural India (Ravindranath et al. 2000; Agoramoorthy & Hsu 2008). 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 (Sarma et al. 1998).

We studied 125 household biogas plants in villages during 2001–2005 in three states, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh in western India, to record data on the impact of household biogas plants on local ecology and community (Agoramoorthy and Hsu 2008). The biogas plants were established by a local non-profit agency, the Sadguru Foundation, to help rural people to promote natural resources management (Jagawat 2005; Agoramoorthy 2009b). Our study showed that the annual average reduction of firewood was 638 kg/household, reflecting a drastic reduction from 1048.9 kg before using the biogas plants to 410.6 kg afterwards. Each household's impact on the forest for firewood collection after the biogas plant was reduced to 61% (0.7 ton per household). A total of 80 tons of firewood from natural forest nearby was spared by the 125 households each year. It clearly showed the enormous potential of household biogas plants in relieving ecological stress in forest areas of rural India.

After people started using biogas, kerosene usage was reduced by 62% (from an average of 121 litres/year reduced to 46 litres/year. Interestingly, chemical fertiliser usage was also significantly reduced by 50% (from an average of 472 kg/year reduced to 235 kg/year) easing toxic pollutants on soil and the associated ecosystem (Agoramoorthy & Hsu 2008). Before the establishment of biogas plants in villages, the cost of firewood and kerosene in most households exceeded the annual salary of a rural Indian family. Thus, people were often forced to harvest firewood from the forest illegally. Biogas plants, being an eco-friendly affordable technology, safeguard local forest resources.

The negative impacts of chemical fertilisers to soil and ecology are also well known (Hall & Robarge 2003). After the biogas plants were established in villages, the need for chemical fertilisers reduced, and farmers were seen increasingly using the organic slurry as natural fertiliser 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 drylands of western India (Agoramoorthy 2009b).

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 (Starke 2008). 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 centres to promote public awareness on cows, Hinduism, renewable energy, rural economy and sustainable development. When the energy potential of the cow dung is fully realised 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.

Acknowledgments

Sincere thanks are extended to Shri Harnath Jagawat and Smt Sharmishta Jagawat, Directors of Sadguru Foundation for their generous hospitality, kind support and excellent guidance. The contributions of Shri Badal Manna for sharing his experience of biogas are acknowledged with gratitude. The financial support of Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (Mumbai) to carry out the research work at Sadguru Foundation through Tata Visiting Chair status awarded to G. Agoramoorthy is greatly appreciated.

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Povzetek

Po celotnem indijskem podkontinentu ljudje hindujske vere krave pojmujejo kot svete. V prispevku avtorja prdstavljava detajle religiozne, zgodovinske, ekonimske, kulturne in družbene pomembnosti svete krave v hinduizmu. Na podlagi analize tudi predlagava rabo svetih krav za izboljšanje okolju prijaznega življenja v Indiji v bližnji prihodnosti.

KLUJČNE BESEDE: hinduizem, zaščita krav, religija, kultura, ekonomija, družba, Indija

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