

A Very Brief History of the Holy Cow

When one thinks of India, one often thinks of the Holy Cow—and for good reason. The cow has enjoyed an exalted status in Indian history and culture for thousands of years. The cow gives abundantly to humans without asking for much in return; it has a reputation for being gentle and motherly. A memorable sight for most tourists is to see cows strolling about busy roads at their leisure, sometimes stopping in the middle of a busy street for an afternoon pause. And the truly amazing part is that people will not usually disturb the cow, but try to make their way around it!

Surplus cow's milk, along with ripe fruits that fall from the tree, has traditionally been considered to be the food with the least amount of violence involved in its consumption by humans. Indians, especially those from the north, are amongst the few populations of the world that can digest lactose throughout life because of their proximity to cattle over thousands of years.

The cow provides more than milk. Cow dung has a multitude of uses—among other things, it makes a very energy-efficient and bio-friendly fuel, and it is also used to make the floors and walls of huts. Cow urine is used for medicinal purposes. Both cow dung and urine have antiseptic properties. Bulls still plow the fields and pull bullock-carts, yet a mainstay of small village transport.

Lord Krishna, one of the most beloved figures in the Hindu pantheon, has wide and varied associations with the cow, most notably being his adopted family were cowherds. Not surprisingly, the cow holds a special place in the Hare Krishna movement. Cows are also decorated and adorned during certain religious festivals.

A unique feature to the Indian subcontinent is the existence of structures known as *goshalas* (*gaushalas*), which are essentially old-age homes for cows. Once cows and bulls are no longer useful to humans, they are kept in these shelters for the rest of their natural lives, being fed and taken care of. In some parts of India, cow slaughter is banned; on certain days of the year, cow slaughter is banned throughout the country.

Yet India is no cow heaven. It is of course human nature to exploit other living beings, be hypocritical, and use goodness for less-than-good ends. The milk of the water buffalo is probably more widely consumed in India than cow's milk, and they are no less docile—yet they are not offered the same status as the cow. There is significant evidence that ancient Hindus considered cow's flesh to be a delectable food. *Goshalas* and their denizens are sometimes neglected or exploited, and are very often used as pawns in political and social machinations. The debate over cow slaughter has become, at times, a politically expedient way to create hostility towards Muslims and low-caste Hindus who may work in slaughterhouses or tanneries. And finally, the production of cow's milk today very rarely meets the ideal of a backyard Bessie, well-treated and almost part of the family, with humans consuming only the surplus milk. Factory farming is becoming more common to support the burgeoning demand for milk products.

Animal cruelty exists in India, as it does everywhere. The English expression of “dying a dog's death” has an equivalent in Hindi, and reflects the wretched state of most dogs in India. In general, though, it is a fair statement to say that animals in India are more likely to be treated as living, sentient beings rather than parts of a machine or things for us to dominate. If one is to come into this world as a cow, there is still probably no better place than India. Dinesh Parakh