

The Sanctity of the Cow in Hinduism

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At the close of the Vedic period the cow was still an article of food and was appreciated for that reason, as well as for its other economic values. The doctrine of the cow's sanctity does not appear at all in Vedic literature.

The general Buddhist and Jain, and later Hindu, doctrine of Ahimsa appears at the end of the Vedic period and at that time enters the stream of Brahmanical religious teaching, but the doctrine of the special sanctity of the cow is not at first associated with it.

The sanctity of the cow is first recorded in the works composed close to the beginning of the Christian era, though the texts of that time treat it equivocally.

The doctrine gets a strong position by the time of the completion of the Mahabharata, say at the beginning of the Gupta dynasty, about the 4th Century A D. Its position¹ was made firm doctrinally in Brahmanical circles in the period of composition of the Puranas, and it becomes widely diffused among the Hindu community, gaining ever increasing prestige from then on.

I

THE purpose of this paper is to identify those notions which have been critical in the formation of the Hindu doctrine that the cow has a special sanctity and inviolability giving it a position above all other animals and precluding the eating of its flesh. Most of these notions appear in the period of Vedas, though the doctrine of the cow's sanctity does not come into existence until after that period. The doctrine is essentially one concerning the cow; the accompanying sanctity of the bull seems to be more obscure in origin and likely to stem in large part from non-Aryan sources. It will not be treated in this paper-1

The doctrine of the cow's sanctity seems to be influenced only tangentially by notions originating in non-Aryan cultures. For example, it cannot be shown to derive from the civilizations of the Indus Valley in the third and second millennia B.C. It is true that representations of the bull and the ox appear on seals and among the terra-cotta figurines of the Harappa culture, and that some of these have been considered to have a religious significance, but they appear relatively seldom, less frequently, it happens, than representations of the well-known Indus Valley "unicorn," and the cow is ignored, at least in the terra-cottas.² The interpretation of these representations is at best problematic, and it is unwarranted to conclude that the scenes of bulls goring human beings indicate anything about the animal's sanctity.

Neither does it seem possible to attach importance to the development of the doctrine to such phenomena as the buffalo or bull used as a scapegoat,³ or the use of cowdung as a purificatory substance for washing the walls and floors of houses, or the abhorrence of the cow and its milk by the Shins in Gilgit,⁴ or the common designation of the bull as Shiva's vehicle or the dedication of bulls to him. These various notions are not accompanied by a doctrine that the cow, bull, ox—cattle in general—are inviolable and their meat forbidden.

In Vedic Literature

Before advancing suggestions of the origin of the sanctity of the cow in Indo-Aryan society it seems in order to review briefly the attitude toward cattle, especially the cow, in Vedic and early post-Vedic literature. In the total mass of Vedic literature the cow, the bull, and the ox, collectively cattle, are mentioned more frequently than any other species of animal. It is doubtful if any other large body of literature, belonging to any other people in any period, gives that animal so much importance. The Veda has a couple of dozen or more separate specialized words for cattle, as for heifer, barren cow, cow that has ceased to bear after having one calf, four-year old ox, three-year old ox, large castrated ox, and other kinds of differentiation. Cattle or herds of cattle or the products of the cow are the standard items mentioned in descriptions of wealth. Cattle constituted the great booty in war. No other animal was

so much appreciated for its economic value. The cow or ox was an asset in producing food directly through its milk and flesh and in serving as assistance for agriculture and for transportation. All these phases of the cow's or ox's usefulness are abundantly stressed in Vedic literature, especially in the Rig Veda.

Besides its economic role, the cow and bull and ox had an important ritualistic function in the Vedic sacrifice, which was the centre of the Vedic religion, a function not remotely approached by any other animal. Cattle were the chief sacrificial victims and the products of the cow were the oblation (havis). So, too, no other animal figures so frequently in simile or metaphor applied to a wide range of subjects—the phenomena of nature, such as dawn or rainfall or streams; deities both male and female, human beings, the paraphernalia of the sacrifice such as the stones for pressing out the soma, whose sound as they rub together may be spoken of as bellowing of bulls, or the soma drops offered in the sacrifice, which may be called bulls because of their power.

Yet in all this richness of reference to cattle there is never, I believe, a hint that the animal as a species or the cow for its own sake was held sacred and inviolable. And further there is no knowledge whatever in Vedic literature, except at its very end, of the wide doctrine of Ahimsa—non-injury of living creatures, which in modern Hinduism covers not only mankind but the entire animal kingdom, with special emphasis on the

cow. On the contrary, the animal sacrifice is a well established feature of the Vedic religion;⁵ it included both ox and cow;⁶ and the priests ate the flesh after it had been offered." Further, the cow was regularly used as foods in circumstances calling for elaborate entertainment. For a special guest, such as "a king or a Brahman," one "would cook a large ox or a large he-goat."⁸ A great king of the Rig Veda named Divodasa is frequently mentioned by an epithet Atithigva, meaning "he who (always) has a cow for a guest"- There was a special term for the ceremony of such entertainment (go-arghya 'COW offering") and the celebrant "prepared or did the cow" (gam kurute).¹⁰ The eating of meat seems to have been a common enough occurrence in Vedic society for those who could afford it. Consequently at the ceremony of consecration when various purificatory and self-denying personal observances, such as shaving and bathing, are prescribed, one of them is abstention from eating beef, whether of the milch cow (dhenu) or of the ox (anaduha). A myth is related to support the rule. But the celebrated Vedic sage Yajnavalkya, whose name figures as a great authority in the fields of both ritual and metaphysical speculation, would have none of the prohibition. Said he, "I, for one, eat it (beef), provided that it is tender (amsala)."¹¹ In another passage the yearly performance of the animal sacrifice, which the text says means "cattle," is recommended for perpetuating the sacrificer's own herds, for, says the text, "flesh is the best kind of food."*-

In the

Sutra literature meat-eating is taken for granted. The laws of Apastamba, for example, merely restrict the manner of killing the animal; the text says, "He (the Brahman householder) shall not eat meat which has been cut with a sword (or knife) used for killing."¹³ Again, the laws of Gautama forbid a Brahman to eat the flesh of a number of kinds of animals including milch cows and draught oxen, except those slain for sacrifice,¹⁴

There is an item in Vedic literature which has seemed to some scholars to imply or foreshadow the later wide Hindu doctrine of the inviolability of the cow. This item I

believe to be overstressed, if not actually misinterpreted. It concerns the stem aghanya/aghnya, which means basically "not to be slain" and is used four times in the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda as a masculine noun equivalent to "bull" or "ox" and 42 times with a feminine ending to mean "cow." The question is why the cow or the bull or the ox should be characterised as "not to be slain." Is the answer that these animals were acquiring sanctity and inviolability? This is the interpretation given by Macdonell and Keith.¹⁵ Or is the answer something else? I believe that it is the latter. The problem is really confined to the frequently occurring feminine stem; the infrequent masculine stem seems to be merely a reflex of the feminine, as if a speaker of English were to use an expression "male cow" (cf. Sanskrit pumgava). The feminine aghnya I suggest, could mean or imply that the cow which it designates is not to be slain because it is productive and of economic value; that is, it has or could have a calf, or it gives or could give milk, and is not barren, economically without value. Possibly the masculine form should be understood to mean a bull or ox capable of propagating or serving as a draught animal.

Doctrine of Ahimsa

If we survey rapidly the 42 occurrences of the feminine stem in the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda we can see that this interpretation is not implausible. In three passages aghnya is used as an appositive to dhenu "milch cow" (RV 4.1.6; 8.69.2; 9.1.9.). In 12 passages the text refers to the animal's ability to give milk (RV 1.164.27; 7.68.8.9; 10.60.11; 10.87.16; AV 6.91.2 (—RV 10.60.11); 7.73.8 (—RV 1.164.27); 8.3.15 (= RV 10.87.16); 12.5-58,60,63,65 (and cf. 23)). One passage refers to the animal's swollen udder (RV 9.93.3), Eight mention its calf (AV 330.1); 6.70.1,2,3; 9.4.2, 4.17.19). Four use the word as an epithet of the cosmic waters, which are regularly stated to have the sun as their embryo or calf (RV 9.80.2 (?); 10.46.3) (possibly the reference is to the Cloud as the mother of Agni—the lightning); (AV 7.83.2; 19.44.9). In one passage (RV 8.102.19) a sacrificer complains that he is handicapped in performing the sacrifice

because he has no cow (presumably to supply the milk and its products needed as offerings) and no axe (presumably to cut the wood for the sacrificial fire). In seven other passages the text implies, though it does not definitely assert, that the cow or cows mentioned can bear: in one of these (RV 10.102.7) the word aghnya, is used of cows which are said to have a lord or husband (pati); in one, rainfall is besought of the storm god Parjanya to nourish the cows (RV 5.838); in three others, the word is applied to the sacrifice metaphorically called a cow (AV 10.9.3,11,24); in one, it is applied to the cow (vasa) which is the all-producing and all-containing universe (AV 10.10.1); and in one, it is probably, but not certainly, meant to indicate the anustarani cow (AV 18.3.4), which is slaughtered in the funeral ceremony and is therefore, in spite of its epithet, not inviolable in any absolute sense." In the remaining six occurrences of aghnya (RV 1.164.40; 8.75.8; AV 7.73.11 (=RV 1.164.40); 8.7.25; 18.4.49; 19.162) the context is either inconclusive or obscure. But in no passage is the context such as to exclude the interpretation that the cow is called "unslayable" because it is still economically productive. The word aghnya, is not used in association with words which mean a barren cow (start dhenustart) or a cow barren after calving (sutavasa) or one * which miscarries (vehat), nor is it used with the word vasa when the latter is applied to a barren cow.¹⁸

Lesser items from Vedic literature have been cited in support of the idea that either the wide doctrine of Ahimsa or the narrow doctrine of the inviolability of the cow appears or is presaged in Vedic literature. Keith alludes in this connection to the prohibition against beef-eating at the consecration ceremony mentioned above.¹⁹ The text (Satapatha Brahmana 3.1.2.21) says that one who eats beef is likely to be reborn as a man of evil fame. But it is clear from the context that this result follows only if he eats the beef in the consecration hall. Keith also refers in the same place to the evil consequences for one who eats the Brahman's cow (AV 12.4), but here again the inference is unwarranted. It is quite clear from the

context that the punishment follows not because the animal eaten is a cow but because it belongs to the Brahman as his right.²⁰

Still another passage is cited by Keith in this connection. In it (Kausitaki Brahmana 11.3, inadvertently cited as 12.3), he says, "are warnings of retribution in the next world which are offered to eaters of meat in this"²¹. The context *again* makes clear that this interpretation is incomplete and misleading. The text deals with the usage of various metres in the morning sacrificial litany, and the section in question explains why two of these metres, the Bihati and the Usnth, should be used. By using them the priest encircles the cattle and confers them upon the patron of the sacrifice. If the priest does not use these metres and thus encircle the cattle with them, then, just as in this world men eat cattle, so in the next world the cattle of the patron of the sacrifice will eat him. But if the priest does use these two metres, then in the next world the cattle will not eat the patron of the sacrifice in requital. Rather the patron, just as he eats and enjoys the cattle in this world, will eat and enjoy them in the next world. The warning issued in the text is not against eating cattle but against omitting a certain portion of the sacrificial ritual.²²

The various passages cited from Vedic literature show no knowledge of the doctrine of the sanctity and inviolability of the cow or of cattle. Rather Vedic literature points to a general practice of offering cattle as sacrificial victims and a widespread custom of eating their meat.

Vedic literature is also silent on the wide doctrine of Ahimsa until its very end and then alludes to it in only the barest manner. The doctrine of Ahimsa makes its real appearance with Jainism and Buddhism in the 6th and 5th century B.C., a time which corresponds to the closing centuries of the Vedic period. Mahavira and the Buddha gave Ahimsa the principal place in their ethical systems. In the Vedic literature of approximately this same period Ahimsa makes a brief appearance. There is a single occurrence of the word in the early Upanishads, those attached to Brahmanas, where it is listed inconspicuously with a

number of other virtues suitable to be a priest's gifts: the others are austerity, alms-giving, rectitude, truthfulness (atha yat tapo danam arjavam ahimsa; satyavacanam iti ta asya dakdinaah).²³

In Indic Civilisation

When we leave the Vedic period and pass to that of the rise and formation of characteristic Indie civilization we find the idea of Ahimsa and the doctrine of the sanctity of the cow slowly gaining status in Brahmanical circles. The period is roughly from about the 5th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D. During it a number of important texts have allusions of greater or less explicitness to these notions.

One of these is the Bhagavad Gita. In it the sanctity of the cow is not mentioned at all and the wider doctrine of Ahimsa is little developed. The Bhagavad Gita uses the word Ahimsa four times (10.5; 13.7; 16.2; 17-14), and each time with no special significance but rather in a catalogue of human characteristics, good and bad (10.5) or of the content of knowledge (13.7) or of virtues (16.2) or of the elements of bodily austerity (17,14). It never elaborates on Ahimsa as a doctrine; rather its attitude is the opposite. Krishna's teachings are meant to dispel Arjuna's qualms at shedding the blood of his opponents and his corresponding willingness to submit unresistingly to their weapons (1,28-47). In this purpose Krishna is successful and Arjuna leads his side to battle and victory (18.73). As F. Edgerton remarks: "...some lip-homage is paid to it (Ahimsa). But it is never definitely and sharply applied in such a form as 'Thou shalt not kill.'²⁴

Next I would like to refer to the laws of Manu. This work is equivocal on the subjects of Ahimsa and the inviolability of the cow. On one side it prescribes that a student of the Veda, who is of course a Brahman, should avoid flesh, along with honey, perfume, garlands, women, gaming, and other harmful things (2177; 11.159), and includes Ahimsa with truthfulness, non-stealing, purity, and restraint of the senses in a summary of the duties of the four classes of society (10.63). Again it says that he who eats the meat of any animal in this world will be

eaten by that same animal in yonder world (5.55). In another stanza it forbids injury to cows, along with injury to one's teacher, a reciter of the Vedas, one's father, mother, spiritual preceptor, Brahmins, and all ascetics (4162). In still another (11.60) it includes cow-slaughter (govidha) in a long list of crimes. These passages support Ahimsa and the sanctity of the cow, but there are others which essentially deny the doctrines. One of the latter classifies animals into those which may and those which may not be eaten (5.11. ff.). Another specifically says, "One should eat flesh which has been consecrated, and at the desire of Brahmins, and when duly required, and in danger of life. Prajapati made all this food for life; both movable and immovable, all is food for life. The immovable (things are) food of those that move about; the toothless, of those with teeth (or fangs); those without hands, of those with; the cowardly (such as deer), of the bold *(such as the tiger). An eater who even day by day eats eatable living beings is not polluted, for the eatable living beings were created by the creator as well as the eaters" (5.27-30).²⁵ The general position of Manu's law book is that one should eat consecrated flesh, but not unconsecrated flesh; that is, he should not eat flesh which has not been offered in sacrifice (5.36-38). By eating consecrated flesh he does good both to himself and to the slain animal (5.39-42). But if he does not eat it, he will be reborn as a beast for twenty-one existences (5.35).

Another celebrated text of the same general period which is ambivalent on these questions is the Arthashastra. In this work the sale of meat is recognised as legal, and butchers are required to see that the meat they sell is fresh; however, cattle—calf, bull, milch cow—were not to be slaughtered (226). If cattle are wrongfully grazed in land not belonging to their owner they may be driven out but are not to be injured (3.10). The institution of setting free a bull consecrated to a deity to wander is recognised (3.10). These passages favour the cow. But another passage refers to "cattle which are fit only for the supply of flesh" (2.19), thus indicating that not all cattle were inviolable. Pos-

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sibly the text implies that these animals were otherwise economically worthless and expresses an idea similar to that which I suggested above lies at the bottom of the use of the Vedic word *aghnya*.

The Mahabharata, taken as a whole, shows Brahmanic rule and popular practice to be at variance. In one passage the text states that he who kills a cow lives as many years in hell as there are hairs on the cow's body (1374.4; cf. Ordinances of Manu 5.38), and various other passages command Ahimsa. Yet elsewhere meat-eating is mentioned in a casual manner and the existence of a butcher shop is nothing out of the ordinary (3.207).²⁶

The Buddhist records during this same period also show that the doctrine of Ahimsa was not well established in popular practice, though the Buddhists and Jains were promoting it zealously. Asoka, on being converted to Buddhism (perhaps¹ around 262 B.C.), became an unswerving adherent to the doctrine of Ahimsa. He instituted a strict set of rules to enforce it, which are recorded in his Pillar Edict V, and appointed officers to enforce these and other moral legislation (Rock Edicts V, XII; Pillar Edict VII). Yet the Pali texts make it clear that hunters, trappers, and butchers were recognised traders, and there were shops to handle their wares.²⁷ About sixty years after Asoka's death a Hindu dynasty arose in his capital, whose founder Pusyamitra is said to have revived the horse-sacrifice, as was recorded without shock about five centuries later by Kalidasa in the *Malavikagnimitra*. Both Pusyamitra's dynasty (the *yungas*) and the following dynasty (the *Andhras*) are said to have reinstated the old Vedic animal sacrifices.²⁸

When we get to mediaeval India we find that the doctrines of Ahimsa and the sanctity of the cow are still fighting their way against popular resistance or apathy. The Buddhist emperor Harsha (606-647 A.D.) endeavoured to enforce the doctrine of Ahimsa and imposed penalties for its violation up to and including capital punishment, according to the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang, who visited India 630-644.²⁰ Various other rulers endeavoured to enforce Ahimsa

of whom one was the Jain convert King Kumarapala, who reigned in Gujarat 1142-1172. He is stated to have imposed the death penalty upon an unfortunate merchant who was found in possession of meat near a sanctuary in the capital city of Anhilwadapatan, according to the *Prabhavakacarita* 22.823-830.30 Hindu monarchs gave the doctrine of Ahimsa greater or less support, especially when they felt strong enough to enforce it. For example, the historian Kalhana records instances in the *Rajatarangini* (3.5-6; 5.119).

Firmly Fixed in Dogma

The bulk of mediaeval Brahmanic literature and even the later strata of the Mahabharat treat Ahimsa and the sanctity of the cow as established doctrine and ignore such evidences of dissidence as we have been noticing above. For example, a long section of the Mahabharat (*Anusasana parvan* 76-83) is devoted to inculcating worship² of the cow. The doctrine of the cow's sanctity and inviolability is also well elaborated in the Puranas.³¹ The epic, the puranas, and a great mass of ancillary literature express the idea of the cow's sanctity in the form which modern Hinduism accepts as orthodox, and on their authority the doctrine is so firmly fixed in dogma, whatever the case may be with practice, that it is possible for a modern authority on Hinduism to say that caste, rebirth, and the sanctity of the cow are the principal tenets of Hinduism on the popular level.³²*

Let me now summarize this discussion of the history of the doctrine of the cow's sanctity. It does not appear at all in Vedic literature. The general Buddhist and Jain, and later Hindu, doctrine of Ahimsa appears at the end of the Vedic period and at that time enters the stream of Brahmanical religious teaching, but the doctrine of the special sanctity of the cow is not at first associated with it. The sanctity of the cow is first recorded in works composed close to the beginning of the Christian era, though the texts of that time treat it equivocally. The doctrine gets a strong position by the time of the completion of the Mahabharata, say at the beginning of the Gupta dynasty, about the 4th century A.D. Its position is made firm doctrinally in Brahmanical

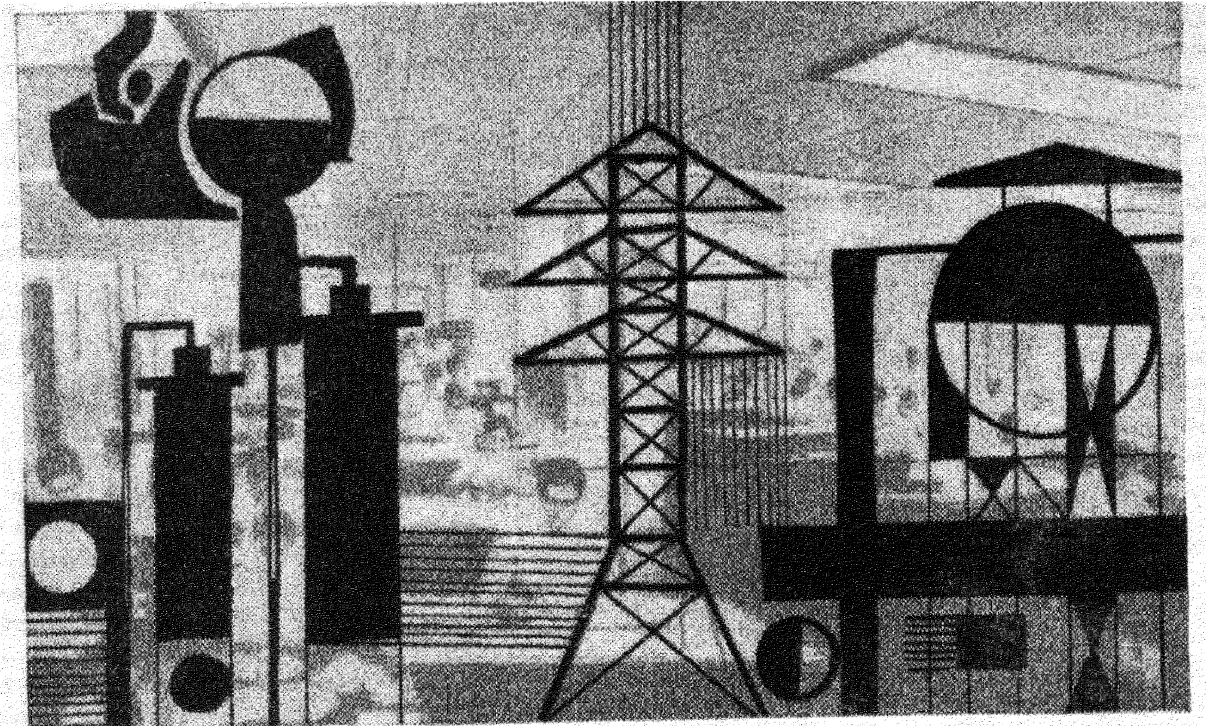
circles in the period of composition of the Puranas, and it becomes widely diffused among the Hindu community, gaining ever increasing prestige from that time on.

II

It seems possible to recognize a constellation of at least five elements which have produced the doctrine of the sanctity of the cow. These are: the importance of the cow and its products for the performance of the Vedic sacrificial ritual; the figurative uses of words for the cow in Vedic literature and the later understanding of these figurative expressions as indicating literal truth; the prohibitions against violation of the Brahman's cow; the inclusion of the cow under the general doctrine of Ahimsa³³ and the association of the cow with the mother-goddess cult.

The importance of the cow in the Vedic ritual and the increase of esteem for the cow in consequence of that importance have already been recognized in other discussions of the cow's sanctity in India.³³ The use of the cow as a sacrificial animal and of its products as offerings in ritual fire has been mentioned above in this paper, is widely known and has been well covered in various descriptions and analyses of the Vedic sacrifice. It need not be elaborated here. But that element in itself is not sufficient to account for the cow's sanctity. Other ideas have been added to it.

The importance of the figurative uses of words for cow, bull, ox in Vedic literature require more specific statement in our present discussion. No symbol of fecundity or maternity or source of nourishment compares in the Veda to the cow. No symbol of virility compares to the bull. Any female at all, whether a deity like *Usas*, or a cosmic element like the Waters (*apas*), or a human queen, or just a beautiful young woman (RV 10.95.6) seems flattered if she is called a cow or compared to a cow or is characterized as a mother of cows (RV 4.52.2). And, of course, a heroic god like *Indra* or *Agni*, or a human being is gratified to be lauded as a bull. The very gods are to be born of a cow (*gojata*). I think I can say without needing to make a count that the words for cow and bull are used as epithet or in simile and metaphor with reference



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to entitles of the highest religions significance much oftener than in their primary sense with reference to actual animals.

Figurative Uses

There are a few of these uses which I wish to mention with some pointedness. One is the characterization of the cosmic waters as cows. In the Vedic creation myth, where the god Indra is cast as the hero, the change of the cosmos from its uncreated or pre-created chaotic state to one operating bylaw (rta) requires first of all that these Waters should be released from confinement. Vrtra has been holding them in a cave. When Indra slays Vrtra, the Waters, now released, come forth like lowing cows (RV 1.32.2). Not only do they appear as cows, but they are, it happens, pregnant, and they give birth to the Sun, who is called their Calf (vatsa). Thus moisture, warmth, and light are made available in the universe. Cosmic law or truth (rta) is established, the earth is spread out and the sky is extended above it, the sun is put on its course, gods and men are assigned their respective functions (vrata). This is how our universe of earth, atmosphere, and sky came into existence.³⁴ Throughout the Veda the cosmic Waters are described in simile or metaphor or by epithet as cows, motherly cows, cows of plenty. So, too, in another mood the rain clouds may be called cows and they have a calf which is the lightning. And Agni, the god of the Vedic sacrifice and the counterpart on earth to the lightning in the atmosphere and the sun in the sky, is called "Son of the Waters" (apam napat) or "the bull, who has grown great in the lap of the Waters" (RV 10.8.1). All life depends upon Waters. They purify their worshipper and give healing, both physical and moral. They are, in short, both sanctified and sanctifying, and when they are called cows they invest the cow, at least for the time being, with a part of their sanctity.

Another important feminine figure of the Veda who is frequently called a cow is Aditi. Aditi is a personification of a pure abstraction. Her name means "boundlessness, freedom, expansion." Aditi is the spirit or attitude or force of change which at the beginning of things led to creation, and as such stands in contrast to the

spirit or attitude or quality of conservatism inertia or restraint which would have prevented creation. In the creation myth the forces leading to or inducing change and creation are personified as her sons (aditeh putrah) and called Adityas, that is, promoters of expansion, in contrast to the Danava Vrtra who stood for binding or non-expansion and is called son of Danu ("restraint"). By getting Indra to fight their battle against Vrtra and Kill him and so to release the waters when the "covering" (vrtra) has been split or removed, they give the impetus to the process of creation. In the late Rig Veda Aditi receives a certain amount of personality as a personification of the cosmic generality. Say a stanza (RV 1.89.10): "Aditi is the sky; Aditi is the atmosphere; Aditi is the mother (earth?); the father (sky?); the son (Indra? or Agni?); Aditi is all the gods and the five folk; Aditi is what is born; Aditi is what is to be born". Since her name means "freeing" she acquires a moral function, and is conceived as freeing from sin. She is also connected with light, which spreads far and wide. She is called a milch cow (dhenu) who issues full streams [of blessings] for pious folk who make the oblation" (RV 1.153.3). In the soma ceremony her name (aditi) is used as an epithet of that cow whose daughters are the milk sought by the masculine element soma, here compared to a tawny bellowing bull inflamed with lust

(harir akran...nrmna sisano mahiso na sobhate). Again, in another passage dealing with the same ceremony (RV 9.96.15) Aditi is said to pour out milk payo na dugdham aditer isiram). In a different sort of context (RV 10.11.1) Aditi has an active undeceivable bull as her son—just who is meant is uncertain, perhaps Agni or Indra—who milks from her the streams of heaven's milk for another bull, perhaps the Sun (vrsl visne duduhe dohasfi, divah paytinis" yahvo aditer adabhyah). In the performance of the Vedic ritual she is symbolized by a cow, as is also the personified sacrificial food, consisting of the cow's products milk and butter and called Ha or Ida³⁵

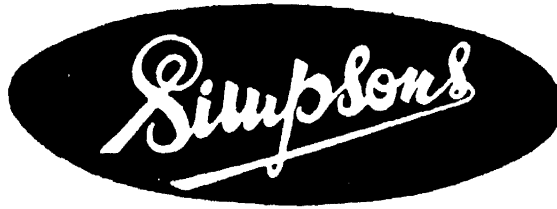
There is no need to be exhaustive about the comparison or symbolism or identification of Aditi with the cow. I would only call attention to one

more feature of Aditi's mythology, namely her identification with the earth. This may possibly appear in the Rig Veda and the Atharva Veda (RV 1.72.9; AV 13.1.38). where Aditi is described as prithivi (cf. RV 4.55.1; 7.62.4, where Sky and Earth are possibly equated with Aditi, and note RV 1.89.10, which is quoted above). The word prithivi "the wide one" (fern.) is the commonest of all the words for earth in the Rig Veda, as it probably is in post-Vedic Sanskrit as well. Whether the application of prithivi to Aditi in the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda merely means that she is wide extending or instead means that she and the earth are identical, there is no doubt that the latter identification does occur in Vedic ritual literature.³⁶ And the earth, it happens, is another feminine entity which, under the name of Prthivi or Mahi, is called a cow in the Rig Veda (4.41.5; 10.133.7; perhaps also 10.67.5; 10.101.9). A little later in time, in the great hymn of the Atharva Veda (12.1) to the goddess Earth (Prthivi), she mates with the bull Indra (stanzas 6, 37), milks benefits for her worshippers (stanzas 7, 9, 10) as a steady cow that does not kick when being milked (stanza 45), has sweet milk in her udder (stanza 59), is Aditi yielding milk as desired (stanza 61).

Aditi, Earth and Cow

The equation in Vedic literature and thought of Aditi, Earth, and Cow is recognized in the Naighantuka (1.1.4-5; 2.3.16), where cow (go) is synonymous with many things including earth, heaven, speech (Vac), Aditi. The use of the word or words for "cow" had by then grown from a descriptive figure of speech applied in compliment to feminine entities until it had become a symbol of the holiest of those entities and had finally won identity with them. The metaphor or symbol had run away from those who employed it. They had ceased to distinguish it from the object it had been meant to adorn or to represent, and thus the cow had acquired their holiness as a quality of its own.

The third item of Vedic practice and thought which I want to relate to the doctrine of the cow's sanctity is that of the cow as the Brahman priest's sacrificial fee. The cow was



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the characteristic fee and the name of the fee, *daksina*, means "the richly milking one." The interest of the Vedic Brahman in his fee has been vividly described by M. Bloomfield.³⁷ There are many references in Vedic literature to the Brahman's cow, his right to it, and the dire consequences that will befall one who withholds it or injures or misappropriates it and the corresponding benefits accruing to him who bestows it. The Brahman's cow is equated with Aditi and the Earth and all else that is full of good for the pious. The Rig Veda develops the theme in several places, one of which I quote (RV 8.101.15-16). It consists of two threatening stanzas couched in riddlesome language: "Mother of the Rudras, daughter of the Vasus, sister of the Adityas, navel of the nectar (immortality) — to one who can understand let me proclaim this, 'Injure not the guiltless cow Aditi!' [Then Aditi speaks:] 'Me, who know the spell, raising up the sacrificial voice (*vacam*) inherent in all pious devotions, a goddess arrived from the gods, me, the cow, the mortal of slight intelligence has appropriated as his own.'"³⁸ The Atharva Veda has four hymns devoted exclusively to guaranteeing the Brahman secure possession of his cow, or in a wider sense of all his property (5.18; 5.19; 12.4; 12.5). To injure the Brahman's cow is to injure the Brahman himself and thus to violate the very ordinances of the cosmos. Let me quote a few stanzas from these hymns in Bloomfield's lively translation:³⁹

[from 12.4]

2. With his offspring does he trade, of his cattle is he deprived, that refuses to give the cow of the gods to the begging descendants of the Rsis.

3. Through (the gift of) a cow with broken horns his (cattle) breaks down, through a lame one he tumbles into a pit, through a mutilated one his house is burned, through a one-eyed one his property is given away.

6. He that pierces her ears [to insert his own tag of ownership] is estranged from the gods. He thinks: "I am making a mark (upon her)," (but) he diminishes his own property.

11. For those that come request-

ing her the cow has been created by the gods. Oppression of Brahmans it is called, if he keeps her for himself,
[from 5.181]

1. The gods, O king, did not give to thee this (cow) to eat. Po not, O prince, seek to devour the Cow of the Brahmana, which is unfit to be eaten!

2. The prince, beguiled by dice, the wretched one who has lost as a stake his own person, he may, perchance, eat the cow of the Brahmana, (thinking,) "let me live today (if) not tomorrow!"

7. He swallows her (the cow), bristling with a hundred hooks, (but) is unable to digest her, he, the fool who, devouring the food of the Brahmans, thinks, "I am eating a luscious (morsel)."

10. They who ruled over a thousand, and were themselves ten hundred, the Vaitahavya, when they devoured the cow of the Brahmana, perished,
[from 5.19]

3. They who spat upon the Brahmana, who desired tribute from him, they sit in the middle of a pool of blood, chewing hair,

4. The cow of the Brahmana when roasted, so far as she reaches does she destroy the lustre of the kingdom; no lusty hero is born (there).

5. A cruel (sacrilegious) deed is her slaughter; her meat, when eaten, is sapless; when her milk is drunk, that surely is accounted a crime against the Fathers.

10. King Varuna pronounced this (to be) poison, prepared by the gods: no one who has devoured the cow of a Brahmana retains the charge of a kingdom.

12. The kudi plant (Christ's thorn) that wipes away the track (of death), which they fasten to the dead, that very one, O oppressor of Brahmans, the gods did declare (to be) thy couch.

13. The tears which have rolled from (the eyes of) the oppressed (Brahmana)' as he laments, these very ones, O oppressor of Brahmans, the gods did assign to thee

as thy share of water,

14. The water with which they bathe the dead, with which they moisten his beard, that very one, O oppressor of Brahmans, the gods did assign to thee as thy share of water.

15. The rain of Mitra and Varuna does not moisten the oppressor of Brahmans; the assembly is not complacent for him; he does not guide his friend according to his will.

It is clear from these hymns that the Brahman's cow is a sacred and forbidden cow, by cosmic decree, for all but the Brahman; or at any rate it is clear that the Brahman authors of these hymns wanted the rest of the world to think so. After hearing such imprecations and curses as these hymns express, that king must have been a chill and hardened atheist who withheld the cow that was due the Brahman or took it or any other property away from the Brahman who owned it.

It should be noted that though the Brahman's cow is sacred, it is not sacred because it is a cow. It is sacred because it is a Brahman's. All his property is equally inviolable. The wicked king's sin lay in robbing the priesthood, not in taking animal or specifically bovine life.

We can now summarize the attitude towards the cow at the close of the Vedic period. It was still an article of food, and was appreciated for that reason economically as well as for its other economic values. It had also a great deal of religious context, which had put around it an aura which it perhaps did not possess when the Aryans entered India with their herds. This aura started with the importance of the cow and its products as ritual offerings. All the economic and ritual merits of the cow had led to an extensive figurative use of the animal in the Vedic hymns and the rest of Vedic literature, with reference to the cosmic Waters, the cosmic generality Aditi, and the all-productive and all-nourishing Earth. These had been called cows so often that they had come to be considered cows. At the same time the Brahmans were promoting with all the force they could command the idea that the Brahman's cow was in-

violable. The Brahman's cow was in itself a symbol of all those honoured feminine figures to which the name cow had been applied in figurative language. But the figurative quality of such application was fading from sight. By the close of the Vedic period the older texts, especially the hymns of the four Samitis, were becoming obscure and difficult to understand.⁴⁰ As the past dimmed, metaphor and epithet were taken as literal and the sacred figures were considered actually to be cows. In reversal, the cow was considered to be those figures. Coupled with this misunderstanding was an enhanced importance given to the idea of the inviolability of the Brahman's cow and the fearful penalties for killing it. The sanctions which applied to the Brahman's cow were ready at hand to be applied to cows in general.

At this juncture the doctrine of Ahimsa came to the Aryan community. The roots of this doctrine are obscure; they are certainly not to be found in the Veda, but where they are to be found is a problem still unsolved. It is, however, a justifiable inference, and an inference common among students of Indian thought, that Jainism and Buddhism popularized the doctrine. They gave it a sanction in associating it with another doctrine also becoming prominent at that time, that of Karma and Rebirth. Violation of Ahimsa would have an effect upon the violator in a future existence. At the end of the Vedic period the doctrine of Ahimsa makes its first appearance in Hindu literature, as was pointed out above. But the doctrine of Ahimsa as the Jains and Buddhists preached it did not discriminate in its application in favour of the cow or cattle. It applied to the entire animal world. All animals were viewed alike; none was translated above the others and venerated. An examination of the sermons incorporated in the canons of these two faiths will show this to be true on the level of authority. An examination of the copious supply of parables, legends, tales, novelle, traditions, which appear in non-canonical literature, will also confirm it on the level of popular acceptance. The slaying of any kind of creature—goat, bird, whatever it may be—will be followed by just as severe retribution as the slaying of any other, such as a cow. In fact, a cow is very seldom the vic-

tim in their edifying exempla. And when Ahimsa is first mentioned in Hindu, or Brahmanical texts (Chandogya Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita), there is no intimation of the content of the idea there, no suggestion that it applies to the cow more than to any other animal, or even that it applies to animals at all rather than merely to human beings.

Moral Sanction

The mere acceptance of the doctrine of Ahimsa does not in itself explain the origin of the sanctity of the cow in Hinduism. But the acceptance of that doctrine at a time when the Vedic attitude toward the cow had acquired the special characteristics which we have described seems to have played a decisive part in the belief that the cow was holy and should be held inviolable. Further, the doctrine of Ahimsa gave to the idea of the inviolability of the cow a kind of moral sanction hitherto lacking. Compassion toward living creatures touched the heart of Hindus, as well as of Jains and Buddhists, and became an ethical principle of great power. It expressed the need not merely for kindness towards one's fellow man but towards all animal creation, with which Indians feel themselves to be fellows. When it was expressed towards the already exalted cow, it had the result of giving the cow a place at the top of all animal life, as is so frequently expressed in Hindu literature.⁴¹

At some period, not ascertainable the doctrine of the cow's sanctity, when grown up in the Aryan Brahmanic environment, became associated with the ancient pre-Aryan conception of the Great Mother or Earth Goddess. This has been known in India since the time of the Indus valley civilizations of the 3rd and 2nd millennia B. C. It is certainly one of the oldest cults of civilized India. Its ramifications in non-Aryan communities and in Aryan are widespread today. There is an obvious affinity between it and the Vedic conception of the cosmic Waters, Aditi, and the Earth as "mother" of "motherly". Though the pre-Aryan (or non-Aryan) and the Vedic notions never blended into a single well-integrated doctrine, they dovetailed well enough to produce the idea of the cow as our mother, and in recent times as

the motherland India. The idea of cow as Mother is one of the most fruitful elements in stimulating the sentimental treatment of the cow in Rajput painting as well as in mediaeval Hindu literature. In modern India the same attitude has been abundantly evident in Mahatma Gandhi's writings on the cow, which was to him a "poem of pity."¹²

The stages by which the doctrine of the cow's sanctity spread throughout the Hindu community are not clearly discernible. It comes conspicuously into view during the period of Muslim invasion and conquest, when Hindus were shocked by the constantly recurring examples of cow-slaughter. To the Maratha chieftain, Shivaji (1627-1680), cow protection was a cardinal issue along with protection of Brahmins and the observance of caste rules and distinctions.⁴³ Sanctity of the cow has long been a dogma which a primitive tribe must accept on coming into Hinduism, though again we cannot say how long this has been the case.⁴⁴ Today in India the sanctity of the cow, is a subject of discussion, interpretation, agitation, political pressure, public hygiene, national economic development. But this aspect of the doctrine's history is not a subject for consideration in the present paper, however much change may come to that doctrine.*

This paper was originally published in the *Journal of the Madras University*, volume 28, number 2, January 1957, pp 29-49. It is presented here with only a few changes from the original.

Professor Ludwig Alsdorf has published an excellent article "Beitrage zur Geschichte von Vegetarismus und Rinderverehrung in Indien" as Number 6 for 1961 of the *Abhandlungen tier geistes — and sozialwissenschaftlichfri Klasse* of the Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz. This long article (pp 557-625) treats the history of vegetarianism, the sanctity of the cow, and the doctrine of Ahimsa which is summarised in the first part of the present paper. Alsdorf does not search for the basis of these doctrines. He merely says: "sie (ahimsa) hat ursprunglich mit Ethik in unserm Sinne nichts zu tun, sondern ist ein magisch-ritualistisches Tabu auf das Leben, das in keiner seiner Formen zerstort werden darf (571, 589; cf p 610). He considers ahimsa, to be "vorarisch" or "urarisch" (p 609) along with the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul and the "rituelle

Ausformung des Kastenwesens (im Unterschied von der arischen Drei- oder Vier-Stände-Ordnung", p 609), but includes no discussion of this opinion.

Notes

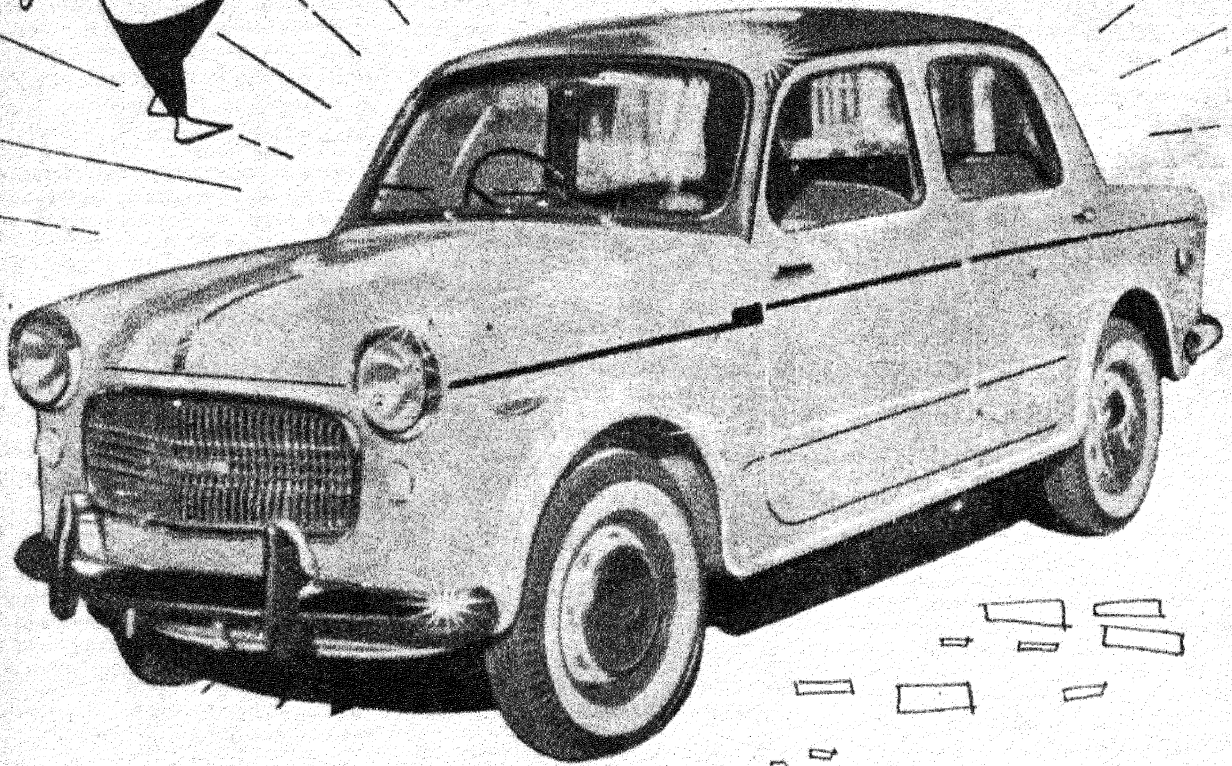
- Cf J H Hutton, *Caste in India* 1946, pp 10, 131, 196. There is a wealth of allusions to sanctity of the bull in the many ethnological studies dealing with India.
- 2 R E M Wheeler, *The Indus Civilization* (supplementary volume to the Cambridge History of India), 1953, p 63.
- 3 H A Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province* (Lahore, 1919), vol 1, p 140.
- 4 F Drew, *Jammoo and Kashmir Territories*, London, 1875, p 428.
- 5 A B Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, pp 324-326.
- 5 RV, 8.43.11.
- 7 H Oldenberg, *Religion des Veda*, P 355.
- B *Satapatha Brahmana*, 3. 4. 1. 2.
- 9 M Bloomfield, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol 16, 1894, p exxiv.
- M Bloomfield, *loc cit*; E W Hopkins in *Cambridge History of India*, vol I, p 232.
- Satapatha Brahmana* 3.1.2.21. The word *amsala* may mean "coming from the shoulder" or "firm" (presumably because not decomposed; see J Eggeling, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol 26, p 11; A A Macdonell and A B Keith, *Vedic Index*, vol II, p 145; and note the prohibition in the *Arthashastra* 2.26 against selling rotten meat).
- Satapatha Brahmana* 11.7.1.1-3; for translation see J Eggeling, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol 44, pp 118-119.
- Apastamba 1.5.16; translated by G Buhler, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol 2, p 59.
- Gautama 17.30 and 17.37; translated by Buhler, *op cit*, pp 266, 267.
- A A Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, p 151; A A Macdonell and A B Keith, *Vedic Index*, vol II, p 146.
- RV 1.30.9; 1.37.5; 3.33.13; AV 14.2.16 (=R V, 3.33.13).
- The anustarani cow is normally one that has not calved (*Satapatha Brahmana* 4.5.2.1 ff). In the Atharva Veda stanza the aghnya cow is to accompany the dead man to heaven (svarga); he is her herdsman or lord (gopati) and she is to enjoy him (tam jusasva); she is possibly the same female who is mentioned in the preceding stanza of the hymn as a maiden (yuvati).
- 18 Cf Macdonell and Keith, *Vedic Index*, vol 11, p 273; M Bloomfield, *Hymns of the Atharva-Veda*, translated in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol 42, pp 656, 658.
- 19 A B Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, p 192.
- 20 M Bloomfield, *loc cit*. See below in this paper,
- 21 Keith, *loc cit*.
- 22 For a translation of the passage see A B Keith, *Rigveda Brahmanas*, 1 he Aitareya and Kausitaki Brahmanas of the Rigveda, *Harvard Oriental Series*, vol 25, 1920, p 409.
- 23 *Chandogya Upanishad* 3.17.4.
- 24 *The Bhagavad Gita*, vol 2, p 83.
- 25 Following generally the translation in A C Burneii and E W Hopkins, *The Ordinances of Manu*, 1884, p 114.
- 26 E W Hopkins, in *Cambridge History of India*, vol I, p 271.
- 27 Mrs C A F Rhys Davids in *Cambridge History of India*, vol 1, pp 207, 215.
- 28 L Renou, *Religions of Ancient India*, p 100.
- 29 S Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, vol 1, p 214.
- 30 G Buhler, *Ueber das Leben des Jaina Monches Hemachandra*, p 39.
- 31 H Jacobi in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol IV, p 225 f.
- 32 J N Farquhar, *A Primer of Hinduism*, section 115.
- 33 H. Jacobi, *loc cit*,
- 34 See W Norman Brown, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol 62, 1942, pp 85-98.
- 35 A B Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, pp 200, 270.
- 36 A A Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, p 121.
- 37 *Religion of the Veda*, pp 69 ft; Hymns of the Atharva Veda (*Sacred Books of the East*, vol 42, pp 430 656).
- 38 The first stanza is used in the guest ceremony, Paraskara Grhya Sutra 1.3.26.
- 39 Bloomfield, *Hymns of the Atharva Veda*, pp 169-172; 174-179.
- 40 Hence there arose those studies of lexicography, phonology, morphology, syntax, metre, which led the Hindus to develop linguistic science, discovered more than two millennia later by the West, to become the fountainhead of our modern linguistic studies. See M B Emeneau in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol 75, 1955, pp 145-153.
- 41 For example, in Hitopadesa story 1.2, where the aged, incapacitated, and hypocritical tiger explains to the

gullible wayfarer whom he is planning to devour that he has turned ascetic to atone for his great sins, which he mentions in an obviously descending order of magnitude as the slaying of many cows, Brahmans, and human beings. Note, in particular, the long section in the Anusasana parvan of the Mahabharata (13.69-83) dealing with the profit one gains from making gifts of kine to worthy recipients, that is, to Brahmans, and containing a great deal of information of many sorts concerning cows. The section includes the story of King Nrga, who unknowingly got possession of a strayed cow belonging to a Brahman, and in a moment of unfortunate generosity gave it to another Brahman in consequence of which he was reborn as a lizard living in a well. There is a cow heaven, which is a bucolic paradise beyond compare, where only the very righteous go. Kine are proclaimed the mothers of all creatures . . . No one should kick at kine or proceed through the midst of kine. Kine are goddesses and homes of auspiciousness. For this reason they always deserve worship . . . Kine, by yielding milk, rescue all the world from calamity . . . One should not, even in one's mind, do an injury to a cow . . . When giving away kine, the donor should enter the cowpen and say, "The cow is my mother; the bull is my sire. [Give me] Heaven and earthly prosperity. The cow is my refuge!" . . . One should never go to bed without reciting the names of kine. Nor should one rise in the morning without a similar recitation of the names of kine. Morning and evening one should bend one's head in reverence to kine. One should never feel any repugnance for the urine and the dung of the cow. One should never eat the flesh of kine. As the consequence of this, one is sure to attain great prosperity . . . The cows yield the essential milk and ghi which constitute the offering (havis) of the sacrifice and hence the sacrifices rest on them. (Following the translation by P G Ray)

The references to the cow's sanctity are literally inexhaustible. One other work in particular could be singled out, namely, the Bhagavata Purana,

- 42 For Gandhi's attitude toward the cow see the collection of scattered remarks and short essays by him published as a booklet with the title *How to Serve the Cow?* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1954).
- 43 See V A Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, 2nd edition, 1923, p 431.
- 44 For an illustration, see Stephen Fuchs, *The Children of Hari*, 1951, p 358.
- 45 Some interesting remarks on the sanctity of the cow, which at points approach some of the ideas in this paper, appear in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Letters on Hinduism*, M M Bose. 1940, pp 39-42.

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