

Cattle in religion and mythology

Due to the multiple benefits from cattle, there are varying beliefs about cattle in societies and religions. In some regions, especially Nepal and most states of India, the slaughter of cattle is prohibited and their meat may be aboo.

Cattle are considered sacred in world religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and others. Religions in ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, ancient Israel, ancient Rome, and ancient Germany held similar beliefs.

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In Indian religions

Hinduism

Majority of scholars explain the veneration for cattle among Hindus in economic terms, which includes the importance of dairy in the diet, use of cow dung as fuel and fertilizer, and the importance that cattle have historically played in agriculture.^[1] Ancient texts such as Rig Veda, Puranas highlight the importance of the cattle.^[1] The scope, extent and status of cows throughout during ancient India is a subject of debate. According to D. N. Jha, cattle including cows were neither inviolable nor revered in the ancient times as they

were later.^[2] A *Gryhasutra* recommends that beef be eaten by the mourners, after a funeral ceremony as a ritual rite of passage.^[3] In contrast, according to Marvin Harris, the Vedic literature is contradictory, with some suggesting ritual slaughter and meat consumption, while others suggesting a taboo on meat eating.^[4]

The *Chandogya Upanishad* (~ 800 BCE) mentions the ethical value of Ahimsa, or non-violence towards all beings.^{[5][6]} By mid 1st millennium BCE, all three major Indian religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism – were championing non-violence as an ethical value, and something that impacted one's rebirth. According to Harris, by about 200 CE, food and feasting on animal slaughter were widely considered as a form of violence against life forms, and became a religious and social taboo.^{[4][7]}

Milk cows are called *aghnya* "that which may not be slaughtered" in Rigveda. Yaska, the early commentator of the Rigveda, gives nine names for cow the first being "aghnya"!^[8]

According to Nanditha Krishna, the cow veneration in ancient India during the Vedic era, the religious texts written during this period called for non-violence towards all bipeds and quadrupeds, and often equated killing of a cow with the killing of a human being especially a Brahmin.^[9] Nanditha Krishna stated that the hymn 10.87.16 of the Hindu scripture *Rigveda* (~1200–1500 BCE) condemns all killings of men, cattle, and horses, and prays to god Agni to punish those who kill!^{[10][11]}

Many ancient and medieval Hindu texts debate the rationale for a voluntary stop to cow slaughter and the pursuit of vegetarianism as a part of a general abstention from violence against others and all killing of animals.^{[12][13]} According to Harris, the literature relating to cow veneration became common in 1st millennium CE, and by about 1000 CE vegetarianism, along with a taboo against beef, became a well accepted mainstream Hindu tradition.^[4] This practice was inspired by the beliefs in Hinduism that a soul is present in all living beings, life in all its forms is interconnected, and non-violence towards all creatures is the highest ethical value.^{[4][7]} Vegetarianism is a part of the Hindu culture. The god Krishna, one of the incarnations (Avatar) of Vishnu, is associated with cows, adding to its endearment.^{[4][7]}

According to Ludwig Alsdorf, "Indian vegetarianism is unequivocally based on *ahimsa* (non-violence)" as evidenced by ancient *smritis* and other ancient texts of Hinduism. He adds that the endearment and respect for cattle in Hinduism is more than a commitment to vegetarianism and has become integral to its theology.^[14] The respect for cattle is widespread but not universal. Some Hindus (Shaktism) practice animal sacrifice and eat meat including beef at certain festivals. According to Christopher Fuller, animal sacrifices have been rare among the Hindus outside a few eastern states and Himalayan regions of the Indian subcontinent.^{[14][15]} To the majority of modern Indians, states Alsdorf, respect for cattle and disrespect for slaughter is a part of their ethos and there is "*no ahimsa* without renunciation of meat consumption"^[14]

The interdiction of the meat of the bounteous cow as food was regarded as the first step to total vegetarianism.^[16]

Puranas

The earth-goddess Prithvi was, in the form of a cow, successively milked of beneficent substances for the benefit of humans, by deities starting with the first sovereign Prithu milked the cow to generate crops for humans to end a famine.^[17]



A bull bas relief in Mamallapuram



The Hindu god Krishna is often shown with cows listening to his music.



The calf is compared with the dawn, in Hinduism. Here, with a sadhu.

Kamadhenu, the miraculous "cow of plenty" and the "mother of cows" in certain versions of the Hindu mythology, is believed to represent the generic sacred cow, regarded as the source of all prosperity.^[18] In the 19th-century, a form of Kamadhenu was depicted in poster-art that depicted all major gods and goddesses in it.^{[19][20]}

Historical significance

The reverence for the cow played a role in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the British East India Company. Hindu and Muslim sepoys in the army of the East India Company came to believe that their paper cartridges, which held a measured amount of gunpowder, were greased with cow and pig fat. The consumption of swine is forbidden in Islam. Because loading the gun required biting off the end of the paper cartridge, they concluded that the British were forcing them to break edicts of their religion.^[22]

A historical survey of major communal riots in India between 1717 and 1977 revealed that 22 out of 167 incidents of rioting between Hindus and Muslims were attributable directly to cow slaughter.^{[23][24]}

In Gandhi's teachings

The cow protection was a symbol of animal rights and of non-violence against all life forms for Gandhi. He venerated cows, and suggested ending cow slaughter to be the first step to stopping violence against all animals.^[25] He said: "I worship it and I shall defend its worship against the whole world", and stated that "The central fact of Hinduism is cow protection."^[25]

Jainism

Jainism is against violence to all living beings, including cattle. According to the Jaina sutras, humans must avoid all killing and slaughter because all living beings are fond of life, they suffer, they feel pain, they like to live, and long to live. All beings should help each other live and prosper according to Jainism, not kill and slaughter each other.^{[26][27]}

In the Jain religious tradition, neither monks nor laypersons should cause others or allow others to work in a slaughterhouse.^[28] Jains believe that vegetarian sources can provide adequate nutrition, without creating suffering for animals such as cattle.^[28] According to some Jain scholars, slaughtering cattle increases ecological burden from human food demands since the production of meat entails intensified grain demands, and reducing cattle slaughter by 50 percent would free up enough land and ecological resources to solve all malnutrition and hunger worldwide. The Jain community leaders, states Christopher Chapple, has actively campaigned to stop all forms of animal slaughter including cattle.^[29]

Buddhism

The texts of Buddhism state ahimsa to be one of five ethical precepts, which requires a practicing Buddhist to "refrain from killing living beings".^[30] Slaughtering cow has been a taboo, with some texts suggest taking care of a cow is a means of taking care of "all living beings". Cattle is seen in Buddhism as a form of reborn human beings in the endless rebirth cycles in samsara, protecting animal life and being kind to cattle and other animals is good karma.^{[30][31]} Not only do Buddhist texts state that killing or eating meat is wrong, it urges Buddhist laypersons to not operate slaughterhouses, nor trade in meat.^{[32][33][34]} Indian Buddhist texts encourage a plant-based diet.^{[7][4]}



Prithu chasing Prithvi, who is in the form of a cow. Prithu milked the cow to generate crops for humans.



A pamphlet protesting cow slaughter first created in 1893. A meat eater (*mansahari*) is shown as a demon with sword, with a man telling him "don't kill, cow is life-source for all". It was interpreted by Muslims in British Raj to be representing them.^[21] Redrawn the Raja Ravi Varma (c. 1897).

According to Saddhatissa, in the *Brahmanadhammika Sutta* the Buddha "describes the ideal mode of life of Brahmins in the Golden Age" before him as follows:^[35]

Like mother (they thought), father brother or any other kind of kin,
cows are our kin most excellent from whom come many remedies.

Givers of good and strength, of good complexion and the happiness of health,
having seen the truth of this cattle they never killed.

Those brahmins then by Dharma did what should be done, not what should not,
and so aware they graceful were, well-built, fair-skinned, of high renown.
While in the world this lore was found these people happily prospered.

— Buddha, *Brahmanadhammika Sutta* 13.24, *Sutta Nipāta*^{[36][35][37]}

Saving animals from slaughter for meat, is believed in Buddhism to be a way to acquire merit for better rebirth.^[31] According to Richard Gombrich, there has been a gap between Buddhist precepts and practice. Vegetarianism is admired, states Gombrich, but often it is not practiced. Nevertheless, adds Gombrich, there is a general belief among Theravada Buddhists that eating beef is worse than other meat and the ownership of cattle slaughterhouses by Buddhists is relatively rare.^{[38][note 1]}

Zoroastrianism

The term *geush urva* means "the spirit of the cow" and is interpreted as the soul of the earth. In the *Ahunavaiti Gatha* Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) accuses some of his co-religionists of abusing the cow.^[40] Ahura Mazda tells Zarathustra to protect the cow.^[40]

The lands of Zarathustra and the Vedic priests were those of cattle breeders.^[41] The 9th chapter of the *Vendidad* of the *Avesta* expounds the purificatory power of *gōmēz* - cow urine.^[42] It is declared to be a panacea for all bodily and moral evils,^[42] understood as which it features prominently in the 9-night purification ritual Barashnûm.

Judaism

According to the Hebrew Bible, an unblemished red cow was an important part of ancient Jewish rituals. The cow was sacrificed and burned in a precise ritual, and the ashes were added to water used in the ritual purification of a person who had come in to contact with a human corpse. The ritual is described in the Book of Numbers in Chapter 19, verses 1-14.^[43]

Observant Jews study this passage every year in early summer as part of the weekly Torah portion called Chukat. A contemporary Jewish organization called the Temple Institute is trying to revive this ancient religious observance.^[44]

Traditional Judaism considers beef kosher and permissible as food,^[45] as long as the cow is slaughtered in a religious ritual called *shechita*, and the meat is not served in a meal that includes any dairy foods.^[46]

Some Jews committed to Jewish vegetarianism believe that eating beef is prohibited.^[47]



Cattle at a temple, in Ooty India

Islam

Islam allows the slaughter of cows and consumption of beef, as long as the cow is slaughtered in a religious ritual called *dhabīḥah* or *zabiha* similar to the Jewish *shechita*.

Although slaughter of cattle plays a role in a major Muslim holiday, Eid al-Adha, many rulers of the Mughal Empire had imposed a ban on the slaughter of cows owing to the large Hindu and Jain populations living under their rule.^[48]

The second and longest surah of the Quran is named Al-Baqara ("The Cow"). Out of the 286 verses of the surah, 7 mention cows (Al Baqarah 67-73).^{[49][50]} The name of the surah derives from this passage in which Moses orders his people to sacrifice a cow in order to resurrect a man murdered by an unknown person.^[51] Per the passage, the "Children of Israel" quibbled over what kind of cow was meant when the sacrifice was ordered.^[52] Classical Sunni and Shia commentators recount several variants of this tale. Per some of the commentators though any cow would have been acceptable but after they "created hardships for themselves" and the cow was finally specified, it was necessary to obtain it any cost.^[53]

Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptians sacrificed animals but not the cow, because it was sacred to goddess Hathor, and due to the contemporary Greek myth of Io, who had the form of a cow.^[54]

In Egyptian mythology, Hesat was the manifestation of Hathor, the divine sky-cow, in earthly form. Like Hathor, she was seen as the wife of Ra. In hieroglyphs, she is depicted as a cow with a headdress

Ancient Europe

- In Celtic mythology, the cattle goddess was known as Damona in Celtic Gaul and Boann in Celtic Ireland.
- In Greek mythology, the Cattle of Helios pastured on the island of Thrinacia, which is believed to be modern Sicily. Helios, the sun god, is said to have had seven herds of oxen and seven flocks of sheep, each numbering fifty head. A hecatomb was a sacrifice to the gods Apollo, Athena, and Hera, of 100 cattle (hekatomb = one hundred).
- In Norse mythology, the primeval cow Auðumbla suckled the ancestor of the Frost Giants, Ymir, and licked Odin's grandfather, Búri, out of the ice.
- Among the Visigoths, the oxen pulling the wagon with the corpse of Saint Emilian lead to the correct burial site San Millán de la Cogolla, La Rioja.

Modern day

Today, in Hindu-majority countries like India and Nepal, bovine milk holds a key part of religious rituals. For some, it is customary to boil milk on a stove or lead a cow through the house as part of a housewarming ceremony. In honor of their exalted status, cows often roam free, even along (and in) busy streets in major cities such as Delhi. In some places, it is considered good luck to give one a snack or fruit before breakfast.

In India

Constitution of India mandates the protection of cows in India.^[1] The slaughter of cattle is allowed with restrictions (like a 'fit-for-slaughter' certificate which may be issued depending on factors like age and gender of cattle, continued economic viability, etc.), but only for bulls and buffaloes and not cows in fourteen states. It is completely banned in six states with pending litigation in the supreme court to overturn the ban, while there is no restriction in many states.^[55] This has created communal disharmony in India and frequently leads to unwanted incidents.

Gopastami, a holiday celebrated by the Hindus once a year, is one of the few instances where cows receive prayers in modern-day India.^[56] While the cow is still respected and honored by most of the Indian population, there has been controversy over the treatment of the cows during the holiday. Because cow slaughtering is only legal in two Indian states, cows must be transported around the country in rather poor conditions, usually train or by foot.^[57] This lack of sacredness toward the cows alarms many animal activists and some dedicated Hindus.



A cow shelter (*goshala*) at Guntur, India.

In Nepal

In Nepal, the cow is the national animal. Cows give milk from which the people produce dahi (yogurt), ghee, butter, etc. In Nepal, a Hindu-majority country, slaughtering of cows and bulls is completely banned.^[58] Cows are considered like the Goddess Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and prosperity). The Nepalese have a festival called Tihar (Diwali) during which, on one day called Gaipuja, they perform prayers for cows.

According to a Lodi News-Sentinel news story written in the 1960s, in then contemporary Nepal an individual could serve three months in jail for killing a pedestrian, but one year for injuring a cow, and life imprisonment for killing a cow.^[59]

Cows roam freely and are sacred. Buffalo slaughtering was done in Nepal at specific Hindu events, such as at the Gadhimai festival, last held in 2014.^{[60][61]} In 2015, Nepal's temple trust announced to cancel all future animal sacrifice at the country's Gadhimai festival.^[62]



A cow walking in Delhi.

In Myanmar

The beef taboo is fairly widespread in Myanmar, particularly in the Buddhist community. In Myanmar, beef is typically obtained from cattle that are slaughtered at the end of their working lives (16 years of age) or from sick animals.^[63] Cattle is rarely raised for meat; 58% of cattle in the country is used for draught power.^[63] Few people eat beef, and there is a general dislike of beef (especially among the Bamar and Burmese Chinese),^{[64][65]} although it is more commonly eaten in regional cuisines, particularly those of ethnic minorities like the Kachin.^[66] Buddhists, when giving up meat during the Buddhist (Vassa) or Uposatha days, will forego beef first.^[67] Almost all butchers are Muslim because of the Buddhist doctrine of ahimsa (no harm).^[68]

During the country's last dynasty the Konbaung dynasty, habitual consumption of beef was punishable by public flogging.^[69]

In 1885, Ledi Sayadaw, a prominent Buddhist monk wrote the *Nwa-myitta-sa* (နွားမေတ္တာစာ), a poetic prose letter that argued that Burmese Buddhists should not kill cattle and eat beef, because Burmese farmers depended on them as beasts of burden to maintain their livelihoods, that the marketing of beef for human consumption threatened the extinction of buffalo and cattle, and that the practice was ecologically unsound.^[70] He subsequently led successful beef boycotts during the colonial era, despite the presence of beef eating among locals, and influenced a generation of Burmese nationalists in adopting this stance.^[70]

On 29 August 1961, the Burmese Parliament passed the State Religion Promotion Act of 1961, which explicitly banned the slaughtering of cattle nationwide (beef became known as *todo tha* (တိုတိုသား); lit. hush hush meat).^[71] Religious groups, such as Muslims, were required to apply for exemption licences to slaughter cattle on religious holidays. This ban was repealed a year later, after Ne Win led a coup d'état and declared martial law in the country

In Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, in May 2013, 30-year-old Buddhist monk Bowatte Indrarathana Thera of the Sri Sugatha Purana Vihara self immolated to protest the government allowing religious minorities to slaughter cows.^[72]

China

A beef taboo in Ancient China, known as *niú jiè* (牛戒), was historically a dietary restriction, particularly among the Han Chinese, as oxen and buffalo (bovines) are useful in farming and are respected.^[73] During the Zhou Dynasty, they were not often eaten, even by emperors.^[74] Some emperors banned killing cows.^{[75][76]} Beef is not recommended in Chinese medicine, as it is considered a hot food and is thought to disrupt the body's internal balance.^[77]

In written sources (including anecdotes and Daoist liturgical texts), this taboo first appeared in the 9th to 12th centuries (Tang-Song transition, with the advent of pork meat.^[78]) By the 16th to 17th centuries, the beef taboo had become well accepted in the framework of Chinese morality and was found in morality books (善書), with several books dedicated exclusively to this taboo.^[78] The beef taboo came from a Chinese perspective that relates the respect for animal life and vegetarianism (ideas shared Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and state protection for draught animals.^[78]) In Chinese society, only ethnic and religious groups not fully assimilated (such as the Muslim Huis and the Miao) and foreigners consumed this meat.^[78] This taboo, among Han Chinese, led Chinese Muslims to create a niche for themselves as butchers who specialized in slaughtering oxen and buffalo.^[79]

Occasionally, some cows seen weeping before slaughter are often released to temples nearby.^[80]

Japan

Historically, there was a beef taboo in Ancient Japan, as a means of protecting the livestock population and due to Buddhist influence.^[81] Meat-eating had long been taboo in Japan, beginning with a decree in 675 that banned the consumption of cattle, horses, dogs, monkeys, and chickens, influenced by the Buddhist prohibition of killing.^[82] In 1612, the shogun declared a decree that specifically banned the killing of cattle.^[82]

This official prohibition was in place until 1872, when it was officially proclaimed that Emperor Meiji consumed beef and mutton, which transformed the country's dietary considerations as a means of modernizing the country, particularly with regard to consumption of beef.^[82] With contact from Europeans, beef increasingly became popular, even though it had previously been considered barbaric.^[81]

Indonesia

In Kudus, Indonesia, Muslims still maintain the tradition of not slaughtering or eating cows, out of respect for their ancestors, who were Hindus, allegedly imitating Sunan Kudus who also did as such.

Leather

In religiously diverse countries, leather vendors are typically careful to clarify the kinds of leather used in their products. For example, leather shoes will bear a label identifying the animal from which the leather was taken. In this way, a Muslim would not accidentally purchase pigskin leather,^[83] and a Hindu could avoid cow leather. Many Hindus who are vegetarians will not use any kind of leather.

Judaism forbids the wearing of shoes made with leather on Yom Kippur, Tisha B'Av, and during mourning.^[84]

Jainism prohibits the use of leather because it is obtained by killing animals.

See also

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| ▪ <u>1966 anti-cow slaughter agitation</u> | ▪ <u>Gangotri (cow)</u> | ▪ <u>Panchamrita</u> |
| ▪ <u>Ahir</u> | ▪ <u>Golden calf</u> | ▪ <u>Red heifer</u> |
| ▪ <u>Apis</u> | ▪ <u>Kamadhenu</u> | ▪ <u>Shambo</u> |
| ▪ <u>Bat (goddess)</u> | ▪ <u>Khnum</u> | ▪ <u>Táin Bó Cúailnge</u> |
| ▪ <u>Bull (mythology)</u> | ▪ <u>Minotaur</u> | ▪ <u>Tarvos Trigaranus</u> |
| ▪ <u>Etiquette of Indian dining</u> | ▪ <u>Nandi (bull)</u> | ▪ <u>Zebu</u> , the common breed of cow from India |
| ▪ <u>Food and drink prohibitions</u> | ▪ <u>Naqada III</u> | |

Notes

- The protection of cattle and prevention of cattle slaughter is not limited to Buddhists in India, but found in other Theravada countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and others.^{[38][39]}

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