

A Theoretical Approach at Understanding the Origins of the Sacred Cow in India

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Amidst rush-hour traffic, in a city boasting over 19 million people, a large cow and her companion cross the street with reckless abandon. Brakes squealing, horns honking, heads and clenched fists asserting themselves out of car windows in protest-thousands of cars are forced to maneuver and heed the right of way to that divine couple who have now decided to take their morning nap in the middle of Mumbai's busiest highway intersection. Thus, the phenomenon of the "sacred cow" within India is directly observed.

An impassioned controversy has been stirring for over 50 years in the great struggle to uncover the origin of the cow's rise to sacred status in India. The debate has been led by the arguments of Marvin Harris, a renowned cultural materialist, who reduces the Hindu ban on cow slaughter as a factor of ecological pressures. He argues that religious sanctity has been mistakenly given to a phenomenon that can best be explained by socio-political factors. However, Harris's theory has met with great criticism. Frederick Simoons, a cultural geographer and contemporary of Harris, suggests that beef was not simply tabooed on environmental grounds but on religious factors as well. In this paper, I will prove that Harris's functionalist approach is incomplete having not sufficiently addressed religious claims. While Simoons suggests a broader "positive" and "negative-functioned" theory, I will present how Geertz's method of thick description reveals many discrepancies in Simoons observations. Thus, in compliance with Geertz's interpretive model, I will conclude that in order to further determine the origins of the sacred cow in India, we must understand basic philosophical points of Hinduism concerning the nature of the soul, the laws of *karma*, and reincarnation.

In his essay *The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle*, Harris explains that, "I have written this paper because I believe the irrational, non-economic, and exotic agents of the Indian cattle complex are greatly overemphasized at the expense of rational, economic, and mundane interpretations"(261). He asserts that instead of Hindu theology, taboos, customs, and rituals associated with Indian cattle require a "positive-functioned" explanation resting upon India's adaptive response to ecological degradation. This theory can be described as cultural materialism in that the holy designation of the cow is reduced to a socio-economic response of practical necessity.

Harris proposes this materialist explanation as a general theory in other cases where the flesh of a certain animal is made taboo when it becomes too costly as a result of ecological changes. The basic components of his theory include recognition that the animal was formerly sacrificed or eaten, a subsequent rise in population density, and a responsive restriction imposed when the animal can no longer be raised in sufficient numbers to meet societal needs.

In contrast to the simple pig whose flesh became an abomination in the Middle East after it became too expensive to be raised for meat, India's cattle were valued for their milk and traction power over and above their function as meat. As cattle in India became too costly to be raised as meat, their plowing value increased in that growing populations demanded more agricultural cultivation. Therefore, they came to be protected rather than abominated, and so "the Hindu religion came to emphasize everyone's sacred duty to refrain from killing cattle or eating beef" (*The Sacred Cow* 240).

Harris defends the religious ban on the slaughter of cattle and the consumption of beef today as a continuation of India's adaptation to swelling populations, increased energy demands, and prolonged drought conditions. In contrast to a popular report published by Vikas Mishra, who views any ban on cow slaughter in opposition to India's economic interest, Harris suggests that "the taboo in question does not decrease the capacity of the present Indian system of food production to support human life" (240). Thus, his cultural materialist theory of understanding the origin of the sacred cow stands to reason.

Before analyzing Harris's theory, it is essential to first present the sacred cow to the reader and briefly discuss its presence as a sacred symbol in the *Vedas*, within Indian folklore, and in India today. It is apparent that the Indian cow claims figurative, ritualistic, economical, and political significance.

When addressing symbolism of the cow in India, we can turn to the ancient scriptural texts of India, the *Vedas*, including the *Bhagavata-purana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad-gita*, and *Rg Veda*, wherein ample references to the cow are found. Amongst *Vaishnavas*, who represent a large percentage of Hindus in India, the *Bhagavata-purana* is honored as containing the essence of the essence of the *Vedas*. In the beginning of the *Bhagavata-purana*, the bull appears as the emblem of moral principles and the cow as a representation of earth (Prabhupada 1.16.18). A situation is described in which *Dharma*, the bull, although crippled and standing on one leg, encounters the cow who appears to be grieving like a mother. He questions her expression of grief:

The so-called administrators are now bewildered by the influence of this age of Kali, and thus they have put all state affairs into disorder. Are you now lamenting this disorder? Now the general populace does not follow the rules and regulations for eating, sleeping, drinking, mating, etc., and they are inclined to perform such

anywhere and everywhere. Are you unhappy because of this? (Prabhupada 1.16.22)

The earthly deity in the form of a cow explains that due to atheistic kings, she was previously overburdened by excessive military armies. However, after receiving relief from the deity Krishna, the *puruṣottamasya* or the supreme person, who personally descended to relieve her burden, she is again lamenting in separation of Him. This passage seems to suggest that abuse and dishonor of cows is a symptom of a degraded culture, which formerly privileged cows.

In other *Vedic* literatures more widely accepted by all Hindus, the cow is described as worthy of honor and protection to such a degree that the hero of the *Mahabharata*, Krishna, is referred to as *Govinda*, “he who gives pleasure to the cows.” Another example is found in the last chapter of the *Bhagavad-gita* where Krishna says, “*kṛṣi-go-rakṣya-vāṇijyam vaiśya-karma*,” explaining that the duty of the mercantile class is that of agriculture, cow protection (*go-rakṣya*), and trade (Prabhupada 18.44).

However, in earlier texts, such as the *Rg Veda*, it is noted that barren cows and bulls were killed ritually (Bryant 195). This has conjured considerable attention within the sacred-cow debate. Books such as *Beef in Ancient India* (1967) by Rājendralāla Raja Mitra and *The Myth of the Holy Cow* by D.N. Jha (2004) contend that cow flesh was enjoyed in the Vedic period, especially amongst *brahmanas*. Jha explains:

Judging by copious textual references, there is little doubt that the early Aryans in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent and their successors in the middle Gangetic valley slaughtered animals and cattle including the cow whose flesh they ate with relish (Jha 36).

By asserting this hypothesis, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* was banned in the Allahabad High Court and Jha's life was even threatened. Subsequent articles approaching Jha's hypothesis in a more thorough and scholarly manner conclude that in the *Dharmasutras* and the early Vedic period in general, the killing of cows were "clearly legitimated and even obligatory in certain situations, provided it is in sacrificial contexts" (Bryant 196). It is noted, however, that even then, "injunctions against meat eating do begin to surface" (197). For example, in the *Manu-samhita*, statements are made asserting that a man "who desires to increase one's own flesh by the flesh of others" and who kills animals outside of *Vedic* injunction "will be slain as many times as there are hairs on the body of the animal" (197).

By observing the societal reaction and the Indian government's subsequent banning of literature that argues the historical sanctity of the cow, we can begin to understand the heavy socio-political role of the cow in India today. Having adopted the principles of *ahimsa*, nonviolence, and cow protection as a central focus of India's struggle for independence from Britain, Gandhi introduced his philosophy of *satyagraha* or nonviolent resistance by explaining to the world the significance of the cow in establishing India's socio-and eco-political autonomy. He well understood the invaluable contribution of the cow in small-scale village economics, in which gifts of milk, plowing, manure as fertilizer and fuel, and urine as medicine, provide all the necessary elements of sustenance and ritual.

It is, thus, of little surprise that contemporary Hindu nationalists continue to champion the significance of the cow and clamor for a national ban against cow

slaughter. This has amounted to considerable tension amongst the Muslim and Christian populations within India that eat beef. Currently, as many as 29 out of 35 states and Union territories in India have either banned or curbed cow slaughter by restriction. States like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Orissa, among others, have passed legislation to ban or restrict cow slaughter (Daily Excelsior). For example, following the Uttar Pradesh Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act 2002, cow slaughter is punishable by imprisonment from seven to 10 years or a fine up to Rs 10,000 (The Times of India).

Having briefly explained the historical context as well as the figurative, ritualistic, economical, and political significance of the cow in India today, we can observe that Harris's functional-ecological approach is inadequate to understand the origins of the sacred cow. Many anthropologists, including Paul Diener, Eugene Robkin, and Frederick Simoons, have also criticized Harris's theory. Diener and Robkin particularly question Harris's failure to acknowledge an evolutionary approach at understanding cultural systems. They argue that "the attempt to account for origins by reference to ecological data often results in superficial research" (Lodrick 7). Robkin continues, "Harris's ecology was naïve, misconceived, and too simply erroneous" (8).

Moreover, Simoons questions Harris's failure to view religion as a "negatively-functioned" factor in the sacred cow controversy. In his essay, *Questions in the Sacred Cow Controversy*, he begins his critique by citing numerous inaccuracies in Harris's hypothesis, many of which he attributes to a misrepresentation of the historical record. Simoons points out that the environmental pressures around 1,000 B.C.E in northern and western India that Harris refers to as the guiding impetus behind cow protection were

in fact due to overgrazing (Simoons 468). Thus, Simoons questions why farmers would then collectively ban beef eating in such a circumstance. Using the same data gathered by Mishra, which demonstrates that legalization of cow slaughter in India would result in an increase in food available to both vegetarians and beef eaters, Simoons argues that the Hindu rejection of cow slaughter does not make good sense nutritionally nor economically.

Simoons continues his argument by further probing into the economic and ecological irrationalities of the sacred cow. First, he provides evidence that wandering cattle are a problem for Indian farmers. Wild cattle are responsible for enormous crop damage, sometimes severe enough that “valuable cropland in certain areas have been abandoned by cultivars because of this menace” (470). While recognizing some benefits, such as manure for fuel, they are disproportionate to the damage done to crops. Another argument he poses is that the sacred cow concept has led to inefficiencies in cattle breeding. While slaughter is recognized as the most effective way of eliminating substandard individuals in order to improve herd genetics, Indian animal husbandry specialists feel that religious restrictions are a major threat to maintaining healthy cattle populations.

A practical extension of cow protection has led to the creation of *goshalas*, also known as cow sanctuaries for old and injured cows throughout India. Simoons argues that funds appropriated to maintain these institutions could be better utilized for human welfare projects. He then questions if India’s cattle are a threat to the national food supply and if religious beliefs contribute to a surplus of cows, thus exasperating the

situation. Citing numerous economic reports, he determines that “in the view of most experts, there is an intense competition between men and cattle for subsistence” (472).

Perhaps we can best understand the sacred-cow controversy from the framework in which Simoons presents as “one which permits traits to be positive-functioned, negative-functioned, or both” (468). Because of conflicting socio-economic and ecological factors, the techno environmental model used by Harris seems unsuitable. Especially deficient is Harris's ignoring of religion as a sociopolitical force and “his tendency to eulogize the functioning cattle economy and over-look its failure and its threats to the environment” (467).

While I agree with Simoons' broad conclusion, I question some of his points. While it would be beyond the scope of this project to investigate the accuracy of his data, I would like to add an additional factor to his cost/benefit analysis. After reading his essay, one should be impelled to question why, despite all economic and ecological disadvantage, India chooses to stand by her sacred cow? What stands out as obvious are the religious factors Simoons fails to present which I will elaborate on further in my critique of both Harris's and Simoons' theories.

In the beginning of *The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle*, Harris acknowledges that he has “never seen a sacred cow, nor been to India” and that his argument rests solely upon intensive reading (261). The lauded American anthropologist Clifford Geertz would find this as immediate grounds from which to question Harris's cultural materialism. According to Geertz, culture is a complicated system of meanings. When attempting to understand religious phenomenon, he supports the general academic trend from one of functionalist reductionism towards a genuine appreciation of religion's

“distinctively human dimension” (Pals 261). Whereas Harris’s materialism concludes that religion is shaped by socio-ecological pressures, Geertz might argue that socio-ecological variables are shaped by religion. He writes that cultural analysis is not “an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Pals 260).

In order to differentiate between superficial explanations of behaviors, symbols, and taboos, Geertz encourages us to apply a method of interpretation which implies “seeking out the system of meanings and values through which people live their lives” (269). In order to do this Geertz introduces us to a method of “thick description.” In so doing, the anthropologist describes not only what happens in any given situation but what is intended by what happens.

In reference to a previous section of this essay in which various literary references were given from the *Vedas* in support of cow protection, I would like to apply Geertz’s method of thick description by elaborating on the significance of certain behaviors and rituals within the Hindu cosmology. The most fundamental principle of Vaishnavism can be found in the *Bhagavad-gita*, in which the difference between the material body and the eternal soul is described and the law of *karma* (action and reaction) and reincarnation is established. Krishna says *nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ ubhayor api dṛṣṭo ’ntas*, translated as, “Those who are seers of the truth have concluded that of the nonexistent [the material body] there is no endurance and of the eternal [the soul] there is no change” (Prabhupada 2.16). The law of *karma* follows in that based on the actions in this birth, one receives a suitable body after reincarnation that will allow them to suffer or enjoy accordingly. Furthermore, the *Bhagavad-gita* states that a saintly person, in

recognition of the equality of all souls, “sees with equal vision a learned and gentle brāhmaṇa, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater [outcaste]” (Prabhupada 6.18).

By analyzing the significance of karma and reincarnation within Hindu cosmology, we can observe many discrepancies in Simoons’ observations regarding the cost/benefit analysis of cow protection within India. The questions he poses regarding costs of wandering cattle and *goshalas*, wasted beef, and inefficiencies in cattle breeding, rest on a scale of material or bodily benefit in relation to the welfare of humanity without consideration to the welfare of the cow. Moreover, if the soul’s benefit outweighs the temporary body’s benefit, might it then be in the best interest of humanity to refrain from killing the cow if the *Vedas* outlaw such animal sacrifices in the current age and especially the unnecessary slaughtering of cows? In attempting to understand a discrepancy in the status of sacred cows in earlier Vedic eras, by applying Geertz’s method of thick description, we can also see how both the sacrificer and the sacrificed benefit, the former in pleasing his deity and the later in being elevated to heaven (Bryant 196). In conclusion, while Simoons sufficiently deconstructs Harris’s theory of exclusive cultural materialism, we must apply the interpretive method of Geertz to Simoons critique in order to uncover a more thorough explanation of the origin of the sacred cow in India.

Altogether, amongst heightened political tensions and environmental challenges, an increasing amount of attention has been given to the way religion shapes environmental attitudes and practices in cultures throughout the world. We can address the contemporary relevance of the sacred cow controversy by understanding how its

findings will impact the complex political situation of the Indian sub-continent. On the one hand, the conclusions derived from the great sacred-cow controversy will have little impact on the cosmology of a typical Indian villager. On the other, recognizing the legitimate religious claim, the sensitivities the sacred cow conjures within India, and the tension it provokes with neighboring Muslim and Christian societies, it would be foolish to downplay its socio-political significance.

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