FORUM ON PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Being Vigilant about Sacred Cows: On Belief and Violence in India

Public Anthropology and the "Sacred Cow"

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The recent rise in "cow vigilantism" in India, wherein anyone accused of eating beef or of killing a cow faces real risk to their lives, has made it necessary for a public engagement of anthropological scholarship on the "sacred cow belief" (SCB). This paper first sets up the public issue for anthropological engagement. It then revisits the "sacred cow controversy" (from the 1960s and 1970s) in anthropological scholarship to remind us that doubt and skepticism were part of the dominant scholarly approaches to understanding the SCB. Here I touch on reification tendencies even within some anthropological scholarship. The paper then explicates current understandings of belief by cognitive anthropologists as a concept to show how the SCB as it appears in popular discourse can be viewed without reification. Using Ortner's notion of "key symbols" and Sperber's notion of "reflective beliefs," it makes a case to view the SCB as a political claim that demands continual social affirmation by actors and as a reflective belief that always requires validation through external context (e.g., authoritative sources) rather than being an established "fact" of an inner state of mind of Hindus.

On September 22, 2015, a mob dragged Muhammad Akhlaq out of his home in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and beat him to death. Akhlaq's neighbor had accused him of stealing a calf and consuming beef. On July 11, 2016, a mob stripped four Dalit men, tied them to a car, abused them with casteist slurs, and flogged them in public for four hours in the western Indian state of Gujarat.[1] The men had been accused of killing a cow that they were caught skinning. The mobs are self-styled *gaurakshaks* (literally "cow protectors") or what the popular media has termed "cow vigilantes," most of whom are organizationally and ideologically affiliated with the Hindu supremacist and ultranationalist movement Hindutva. Since the capture of state power in 2014 by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political wing of Hindutva, there have been a number of brazen assaults, humiliations, and murders of "suspected beef eaters" or "cow slaughterers," all of whom have been Muslims or Dalits.[2] In July 2018 the Supreme Court responded to two public interest litigations and took cognizance of this phenomenon and ordered the state legislatures and police to make cow vigilantism a special crime to be tackled by a fast-track court and with maximum sentence to perpetrators and compensation to victims.[3]

Cow vigilantism is the latest manifestation of mid-nineteenth-century movements around cow protection organized by early Hindutva activists. They attempted to construct distinct "Hindu" and "Muslim" communities by symbolically representing what are known in the South Asian context as "communal" boundaries (Freitag 1980; Pandey 1981; Yang 1980). In this case, the two communities—which are heterogeneous within—are represented as homogenously characterized by the cultural practices of normative food taboos, pork in the case of Muslims and beef in the case of Hindus. The cow (and hence its protection) thus came to symbolize "Hindu" identity and interests. Interestingly, these early movements for cow protection in India framed their arguments in the "liberal idiom of the 'public good'" rather than the "community idiom of religious rights" (Adcock 2010:310), henceforth referred to in this paper as the "utilitarian register" and the "moral register," respectively.

The utilitarian register rationalizes cow protection by claiming the cow as a uniquely useful animal (Simoons 1974). Cow protection organizations such as Bharatiya Gau Raksha Dal (Indian Cow Protection Party) thus claim that the "cow is the animal in this world which has religious, nutritional and medicinal importance in unison."[4] Such utilitarian claims, however, have limits. Thus, even iconic Hindutva ideologues such as V. D. Savarkar argued in the early years of the past century that the utility of the cow meant that it would need to

1. "Dalit," meaning "crushed or broken," is a self-representation by India's former untouchable castes.

2. "As of December 2018, at least 44 people had been killed in cow-related violence since May 2015, 36 of them Muslims," with many more instances of violence (HRW 2019).

3. *Tehseen Poonawalla v. Union of India* (https://scobserver-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/case_document/document_upload/347/27263_2016_Judgement_17-Jul-2018.pdf; accessed May 4, 2021).

4. See https://www.bgrd.org/gau-raksha-andolan/index.html (accessed October 24, 2024).

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Current Anthropology, volume 65, number 6, December 2024. Published by The University of Chicago Press for The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. https://doi.org/10.1086/733267

be killed when needed, such as in times of war (Dube 2015). Indeed, as we will see in the next section, studies of farmers show that aged and decrepit cows are viewed as not useful, and gender-based culling is widespread. Furthermore, in addition to the adoption of tractor technology by Indian farmers, modern technomanagement practices of livestock highlight not only the declining "utility" of cows in India but also their increasingly problematic climate impacts and animal cruelty (Narayanan 2016). As the legal scholar De (2018:167) notes, it is not surprising then that "the cow protection lobby had to perform rhetorical cartwheels to continually show why the cow was economically important."

Cow protection advocates therefore turned to seek validity from a more transcendental but also potentially a more durable argument—the moral register. Unlike the utilitarian register claims that evidence themselves by referring to empirical realities (which are by their very definition contestable), moral register claims appeal to values and beliefs with no attempt to evidence themselves at all. Instead, moral claims about beliefs are simply asserted as if they were self-evident facts with essential and eternal qualities. Thus, votaries claim that all Hindus need to protect and venerate the cow because Hindus hold the cow to be "sacred." Such a claim constructs or constitutes the so-called sacred cow belief (SCB) as a universal belief among "Hindus" and as essential to being a Hindu. For instance, the leading Hindutva organization, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP; World Hindu Congress) calls for a ban on cow slaughter by asserting that the ban is "in deference to the sentiments of Hindus as also to give proper respect to the reverence and sanctity which the Cow enjoys in the Hindu mind."[5] Note the invoking of the affective (sentiments of a community of "Hindus," a sentiment that expresses a value about the cow) and the necessary evoking of the cognitive (a belief—sanctity of the cow in the collective "Hindu mind"). The result is that sentiments (values) and cognition (beliefs) appear as already existing in the "Hindu mind" outside of the cultural and discursive "work" done by the VHP. This reifies the SCB by presenting a historical, moral, and political claim as but an expression of an always already existing state of mind. What is elided is the fact that the VHP, through its massive propaganda and political campaigns (that are based on creating fear of reprisals to nonconformists to their agenda) is the foremost social producer of the SCB as a discursively produced (claim to a) belief. Such a discourse masks the social production of the SCB in historical time and its installation as "community norms" through the exercise of social power. To extend Bourdieu (1991:220), the VHP evokes (produces) the SCB as a reality even as it invokes (articulates) it in its language.

Yet merely invoking "wounded sentiments" of a large heterogeneous population of "Hindus" where the diversity of beliefs is staggering is not an easy task, especially in a country that has a substantial population of non-Hindus.[6] Hence, other means such as culturally coded threats and physical violence are deployed. For example, a ruling party legislator rationalized cow vigilantism in the aftermath of the lynching of Akhlaq thus: "We won't remain silent if somebody tries to kill our mother. We are ready to kill and be killed."[7] The reference to "cow as mother" culturally codes the SCB thus: the cow is as giving as our mothers; we worship our mother as Mother Earth, Mother Goddess; hence, the cow is sacred and to be worshipped just as mother, and killing a cow is therefore as heinous as matricide and would be responded to in kind. Note how the utilitarian value of the cow (as giving) is subsumed under the moral argument of the cow (as sacred). This was not an isolated remark, with several public statements being regularly made by Hindutva legislators and political figures. They follow a longer history of such identification of cow and mother. For instance, R. V. Dhulekar (cited in HRW 2019:19), one of the members of Constituent Assembly debating the making of India's Constitution made the following remark in 1948:

> Our Hindu society, or our Indian society, has included the cow in our fold. It is just like our mother. In fact, it is more than our mother. I can declare from this platform that there are thousands of persons who will not run at a man to kill that man for their mother or wife or children, but they will run at a man if that man does not want to protect the cow or wants to kill her.[8]

A decade later, a landmark case in India, *Qureshi v. State of Bihar*, enshrined the moral register of the SCB within Indian law. In 1958 a large community of traditional butchers, the Muslim Qureshi community, filed a petition in court challenging the ban on cow slaughter on the basis that their rights to livelihood were violated (De 2018). The Supreme Court ruled that the ban did not in fact violate the rights to livelihood (of the Qureshis) or encroach the freedom of religion (of Muslims). Instead, it noted that "there can be no gainsaying the fact that the Hindus, in general, hold the cow in great reverence." The Supreme Court ruling thus made a case to consider Hindu sentiments about the cow for making judgments about cow slaughter. In his critique of the court's ruling in the above case, legal scholar Upendra Baxi (1967:349) sharply warned against mistaking a "judicial awareness of the pro-cow 'sentiment'" for a "sociological awareness." He concluded by arguing that "it is extremely hazardous . . . to take . . . feelings of 'repugnance' towards beefeating . . . as substantiating the 'fact' that Hindus 'in general' hold cow in 'great reverence'."

5. See https://www.vhp.org/organization/18/ (accessed October 24, 2024).

6. According to the latest census in 2011, Hindus comprise 79.8% of the population.

7. Sakshi Maharaj, BJP member of Parliament.

8. M. K. Gandhi notably promoted a view of the cow as mother on both utilitarian grounds and moral grounds (see Jha 2001).

Baxi's sobering critique has been further advanced recently by another legal scholar who argues that there is inherent bias in legal judgments that make the cow appear "inviolable" (Chigateri 2016). Inviolability itself has been historicized by Sanskritist Norman Brown (1964 [1958]:247), who documents how the cow becomes sanctified over a period of time thus: "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." Furthermore, Brown (1964 [1958]:253) firmly places the sanctification of the cow within the political power wielded by the Brahman thus: "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." This paper interrogates the "inviolability of the cow," specifically, the ontological and sociological basis of the central object in the moral register above, the SCB.

The SCB purportedly explains public expressions of reverence (a value) and sentiments about the cow and justifies calls for beef bans and cow protection. The invoking of the SCB by cow vigilantes and their votaries implicates anthropology, arguably the academic home for debates on beliefs, especially beliefs about the Indian cow. For two decades (1960s and 1970s) a "sacred cow controversy" raged in academic journals (such as *Current Anthropology*), producing a rich corpus of knowledge about the cow and the SCB in the Indian context. If "public anthropology" is about how anthropological knowledge is brought to bear on mythmaking and "common sense" at the service of power, then its task is to prevent anthropological complicity in cow vigilantism. The specter in India of "scared citizens" living in fear of lynching casts a long shadow on the SCB and prompts us to ask, What kind of a "belief" needs force and threats to assert its existence within a population? Inspired by Maurice Bloch's call for "an ethnography of doubt," this paper is an anthropological plea to view doubt and skepticism as part of the process of believing when considering the SCB.

To be clear, many Hindus, as is evident in their normal everyday existence, do tend to treat the cow as a special animal and worthy of worship or veneration. Any observer of Indian popular culture would be able to note the ways in which cows are glorified in popular literature (calendar art, educational posters, and popular Hindu representations), the ordinary people who touch them reverentially whenever they come across them in urban or rural India, and the general level of toleration of their presence on urban Indian roads, including marketplaces. This paper acknowledges the above social reality while questioning the hubris of Hindutva that purports to explain the popular behavior of "venerating the cow" as deriving from the SCB in "Hindu" minds. It argues that venerating the cow does not require us to accept the existence of the SCB. The view that people do what they do because of shared and "internalized" beliefs is a view that tends to "fix" beliefs in overly precise ways such that social actors become passive actors who are compelled to simply enact their beliefs. Rather, this paper takes a view that observed behavioral patterns (such as cow veneration) need not necessarily result from shared beliefs (such as the SCB). Instead, it is due to a "shared perception of reality"—a material and symbolic reality—that is continually generated by actors as they participate within a context that politically (normatively) demands particular social practices (such as cow protection). The cow then appears as "a site of the struggles for monopoly of the power to consecrate" (Bourdieu and Nice 1980:265).

The next section revisits the sacred cow controversy to remind us that, with few exceptions, claims about the SCB were viewed with skepticism by anthropologists. However, there were some lacunae in the above debates, and hence they did not ultimately unpack the character of the SCB. Consequently, I take up two anthropological works in the final section that aid us in this effort. Using the work of anthropologist Sherry Ortner, I initially argue for viewing the cow as a "key symbol" in Indian culture but one that has very little to do with beliefs and much to do with politics. This allows us to see how cow veneration can be explained without recourse to the SCB. I then go further and offer yet another view based on the work of cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber that tackles the character of beliefs. Thus, I argue for viewing the SCB not as a belief about a fact (that the cow is sacred) but as a "reflective belief"—a particular kind of belief that is based on socially mediated "metarepresentations." Viewing it thus shows the SCB to be a political claim that demands continual social affirmation by actors, rather than being an established "inner state of mind" of Hindus.

Some Doubts about the Sacred Cow Belief

A puzzle framed the sacred cow controversy that raged in scholarly circles from the late 1950s to the 1970s. The puzzle was syllogistic and operated within the utilitarian register: India has "surplus" cows in excess of that needed for agriculture,[9] and India has a large proportion of its population that is malnourished, so why do most Indians not eat the cow, which is a source of protein? This puzzle was constructed in the context of twin problems facing independent India—the problem of development (how to revive an underdeveloped colonial economy that was still grappling with the problems of hunger, famine, and a food crisis) and the problem of secularism (how to bridge the communal divide between Hindus and Muslims). Thus, development specialists (agricultural, dairy, livestock economists), including the government of India and international aid agencies' reports, made assessments that India's livestock and dairy industry were not as "rational" as they could be and noted the existence of "surplus" cattle as one of the problems (Ford Foundation 1959; Indian Livestock

9. India is home to a large number of cattle, about 20% of the world's stock at that time and around 13% today (http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/QA/visualize).

Census 1961). This tended to explain the puzzle as being due to "irrationality" in resource management. On the other hand, votaries of the moral register explained the puzzle as being due to the existence of a taboo among Hindus against eating beef, a taboo derived from a purported belief, the SCB. The chief votaries of this view were the early Hindu nationalists in the late nineteenth century for whom the cow became a symbol of Hindu identity and resulted in the formation of many cow protection organizations. This view was popularized in the early twentieth century by M. K. Gandhi despite his political opposition to Hindu nationalists. Gandhi's writings gave much force to the SCB, as he derived it from the religious principle of ahimsa (nonviolence). Consequently, the behavior (eschewing beef), the mechanism and proximate cause (the beef taboo), and its purported ultimate cause (the SCB as a religious "Hindu" belief) become exemplars of "cultural irrationality." This view came to represent Indian reality in a popular text by livestock specialists that baldly stated that "the *religious* Hindu would rather starve to death than eat his cow" (Williamson and Payne 1959:196; italics added).

The sacred cow controversy gained momentum, particularly through the writings of Marvin Harris, an anthropologist whose sharp insights were always accompanied by his flair for generating animated debates. Harris fired the first salvo against the above view of the "irrational" Hindu (Indian) by dismissing Williamson and Payne's representation above as the "myth of the sacred cow" (Harris 1965:219).[10] Curiously, Harris omits the word "religious" in quoting Williamson and Payne's abovementioned quote and thus contributed to making the SCB appear as a generalized belief. In a more substantive essay, he dismissed the puzzle itself as ethnocentric (Harris 1966). There, he took on the task of showing how the Indian farmer and Indian farm systems were both "rational" (even if somewhat inefficient). Pointing to the varied uses of the cow in agrarian life in India, Harris described how cows were used not only as traction animals but also as a source of natural manure (dung), for milk and dairy products, for their hide (as leather), for their horns and hoofs, as ecologically beneficial pasture animals grazing on waste for the most part, and as a vital source of protein for non-Hindus, including "marginal or depressed castes." In his words, "Ecologically, it is doubtful that any component of the cattle complex is 'useless'" (Harris 1966:52). Consequently, he questioned the existence of "surplus" cows in India through aggregated statistics. He further noted that far from blindly viewing the cow as sacred, the Indian "farmer culls his stock by starving unwanted animals and also, under duress, sells them directly or indirectly to butchers" (Harris 1966:57). In sum, Harris (1966:52) argued that the beef taboo "reflect[ed] the power of ecological pressures rather than [the ideal principle] of *ahimsa* [from which the SCB was purportedly derived]."

10. That same year, Harris (1959) published a remarkable piece that pushed back on the notion of "superfluous surplus" in the economy.

Harris's (1966:51) argument called into question the puzzle of the "irrational" ("Hindu") Indian, not by denying the SCB but by showing it to be "rational" owing to it being adaptive (or as he put it, "positive-functioning") in the Indian context. His account generated an interdisciplinary debate that lasted for at least a decade thereafter. Seven anthropologists commented on his essay in the same journal issue. All of them agreed with his insistence that "rationality" was context-bound, although each had their own ways of nuancing the argument about rationality. Some dismissed ahimsa as irrelevant, while others brought that idea too within the ambit of ecological adaptation. Harris faced more challenges from agricultural development specialists and economists who argued that cows, by virtue of not being killed, put pressures on food security in India and that they did in fact exist in excess of what was required for producing draught animals, thereby showing that the SCB was not functioning positively (Dandekar 1969; Heston 1971; Misra 1973; for a counterview, see Raj 1971).[11] Other anthropologists, such as Bennett, argued that Harris's explanation was a case of "functionalist reification" in that it presented all behaviors as functioning "positively" as an adaptation (Bennett and Harris 1967). And finally, some others showed how Harris neglected history, power, and conflict and argued contra Harris that the SCB was indeed a religious belief (rather than an ecological adaptation), albeit historically imposed by the ruling classes with overall "negative" impacts on Indian well-being (Diener, Nonini, and Robkin 1978; Freed et al. 1981; Lodrick 1979; Simoons and Lodrick 1981; Simoons et al. 1979).

For our purpose in this essay, it is useful to remind ourselves that although a handful of scholars contributed to reifying the SCB (more on them below), most scholars (even those who disagreed with Harris) showed skepticism of the explanatory power of the SCB. In fact, by displacing or even denying the power of the ahimsa principle, Harris crafted his techno-environmentalist or ecological-functionalist argument without recourse to "beliefs" (religious or otherwise) as playing an important role in shaping behavior. In a later essay he notes that "the mental state of Hindu farmers has never been the central issue in the debate about the sacred cow. The central issue has been whether, despite the anti-slaughter and anti-beef-eating prescriptions of Hinduism, Hindu farmers manage their livestock in a cost-effective manner" (Harris 1987:321). Ironically, this allowed his techno-economic arguments to be read as an indirect legitimation for cow veneration, with at least one economist painting Harris's argument as "a defence

11. The balance of judgment from development economists is usefully summed up by Misra (1973:306) thus: "Clearly, there does not seem to be any economic rationality in maintaining this surplus. This should not however imply that Indian cultivator is irrational. Instead, besides being economically rational, he is religious too. To him cow is not only economically useful but sacred too." The SCB thus is placed outside the realm of rationality, with the Indian farmer doing a balancing act.

of Hindu cow-worship garbed in pseudo-science" (Dandekar 1969:1559).

Harris himself was aware of a more radical questioning of the SCB put forth by none other than M. N. Srinivas (1962:126; cited in Harris 1966:57, 5n), a doyen of Indian anthropology:

> It is commonly believed that the peasant's religious attitude to cattle comes in the way of the disposal of useless cattle. Here again, my experience of Rampura makes me skeptical of the *general belief*. I am not denying that cattle are regarded as in some sense sacred, but I doubt whether the belief is as powerful as it is claimed to be . . . while the peasant does not want to kill the cow or bull himself he does not seem to mind very much if someone else does the dirty job out of his sight [italics added].

Srinivas's reflections (first published in 1955) caution us in our inferences about the existence of the SCB as a "general" belief, even among Hindus. It asks scholars to not unnecessarily invest the SCB with power over people's minds and actions. In doing so, Srinivas approaches the question of rationality very differently from Harris and in a manner that does not reify the SCB. As he insists, the Indian peasant is not "pig-headed, ignorant and superstitious" (Srinivas 1962:126), not because the beef taboo is a rational belief (Harris's position) but because religious attitudes (and by inference the SCB) do not hold the peasant in their thrall (see also Sebring 1987). Rural peasants and farmers whose ecology includes the cow in integral ways may indeed be at variance with cow vigilantes and their urban supporters. Indeed, Sanskritist Wendy Doniger (2009:604) asks, "But are cows sacred in India?" and submits that the term "sacred" does not easily translate from a Christian context into the Hindu one. She also notes that not all things that are not eaten are sacred and that not many shrines to the cow exist in Hinduism

Such doubts about the SCB alert us to the fact that even if we admit the existence of the SCB, it needs to be viewed as a class phenomenon (i.e., emergent from and imposed by a section of the ruling classes and castes) and not as a generalized belief held by the Indian or Hindu population. In an even earlier essay, Srinivas (1952:223) had already noted that "*orthodox* Hindu opinion regards the killing of cattle with abhorrence, even though the refusal to kill the vast number of useless cattle which exist in India today is detrimental to the economy of the nation" (italics added). That "orthodoxy" need not be regarded as hegemonic is documented by economist K. N. Raj (1969:80), who showed how cows are selectively culled (through infanticide and starving female cows) by farmers even in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where "Hindu orthodoxy is deeply entrenched and the sentiment against the killing of cows is strong." Similarly, anthropologist Joan Mencher pointed out that beef eating was underreported, that Dalits clearly ate beef, and that some caste Hindus too ate beef. She reflects thus: "Hindu ideology appears to have more effect on people's *conceptions* about eating habits in their society, than on the habits themselves" (comment in Heston 1971:202–203).[12] Even geographer Frederick Simoons (1961:63; who slipped at times into reifying the SCB; see below) concluded that "however unsatisfactory it may be, the most likely hypothesis suggested by the evidence is that *some* Indian groups had feelings against cattle slaughter and beef eating that derived from the sacred character of cattle" (italics added). Indeed, Simoons went as far as to suggest that claims to the SCB were part of political struggles over the cow. In his terms, "Hindu loyalists" claimed the existence of the SCB as evidence for their insistence on the ban on cow slaughter (Simoons 1973:283, 291). That each of these scholars qualified their views about the SCB by noting that the sacredness of the cow sprung from sections of the populace was however lost in the din of the sacred cow controversy.

However, one critique that was not articulated in the sacred cow controversy, but that acquires greater importance in these times of cow vigilantism, is regarding the method of ascertaining beliefs. Frequently, many scholars who participated in the debate assumed that observable behaviors (and practices) such as "veneration" of the cow automatically and self-evidently imply the existence of beliefs (such as the SCB). For instance, one set of scholars claimed that "one has only to listen to what Hindus say about cows to be convinced that cows are indeed [believed to be] sacred and that Hindus strongly desire their presence *for that reason*" (Freed et al. 1981:488; italics added). The quick slide from listening (to speech) to asserting the existence of a belief ("that cows are indeed sacred") and attributing causality to it for generating sentiments and desires ("for that reason") could benefit from Maurice Bloch's (1991:193–194) urgings to anthropologists to be "suspicious" about rather than "pleased'" with what our informants tell us. Forgetting that beliefs are accessible only by inference and hence always in need of some methodological skepticism makes anthropologists participate in the reification of constructs. This is again exemplified by anthropologist Korom (2000:190), who asserts that "it is a central *belief* that the cow is good, pure, whole, and embodying all aspects of the cosmos within her" (italics added). His evidence for such a claim? None other than that such claims are made in particular Hindu scriptures of antiquity, told to him by actors in the field, or observed as practice of veneration of the cow (by particular caste Hindus). Batra (1986:164), another anthropologist, too takes textual sources, people's practices, and their rationalizations of the practice as evidence for the existence of the SCB and claims that they "generate emotions, affection, sentiments, and respect for the cow and influence behavior towards her in real life." Note a circular logic at work in each of these examples. Textual references, speech, and observed practices (of some groups) allow the anthropologist to infer a generalized "belief" that is, in turn, offered as an explanans for the same practices. In a related

12. A recent study of food habits challenges the myth of the beef taboo and vegetarianism in India. It argues, on the basis of large datasets, that at least 15% of Indians eat beef and only about 20% of Indians are vegetarian, with large regional variations (Natrajan and Jacob 2018).

work, geographer Simoons (1974:25) uses data almost entirely drawn from the rationalizations of Brahman groups to make claims about the existence of "beliefs" about the cow and its products among Hindus, despite his own admission of "great variations" in "Hindu caste acceptance" of such practices and the purportedly underlying "beliefs." Elsewhere, he simply assumes religious "beliefs" from precepts and practices (observation of the precepts) and equates feelings with "beliefs" (Simoons et al. 1979:473).[13] Indeed, one of the handful of studies that empirically inferred the SCB notes that the belief, to the extent that it could be inferred, is held mostly by Brahmans among Hindus and not at all by Muslims (Lodrick 1979).

Admittedly, no one has seen a SCB. To extend an insight from Brubaker (2002:166), "cow vigilantes" routinely reify the cow as a part of their subject position as "ethnic mobilizers." Hence, scholars need to be vigilant about reproducing the reification of the cow. The observed gaps between actual practice and social norm with respect to the cow, noted above by scholars such as Srinivas, Mencher, and Raj, reminds us that people are creative about culture—they interpret it in diverse ways and do not blindly reproduce custom. Some may even entertain serious doubts about the norm or simply view it as an imposition. This raises the question about what it means to state that people "believe" in the sacredness of cows, a question not tackled in the sacred cow controversy. Related questions include what kind of belief the SCB is, how we determine it to be so, how the SCB is acquired and transmitted, how its meanings are shaped in social discourse, and how "beliefs" shape human action or behavior. Whereas anthropologists have long debated such questions of belief (Needham 1972; Sperber 1985; Spiro and D'Andrade 1958) and have recently sharpened their tools of analysis in studying deeply held beliefs (Atran 2016; Bloch 1991, 2018; Boyer 2013; Luhrmann 2012; Shore 1998; Sperber 1997), such critiques have yet to shape anthropological scholarship on the cow in India. The next section is a contribution toward such an analytic for the SCB.

Putting the Sacred Cow Belief in Its Place

More than a century ago, Durkheim (1984 [1893]) made the case for the social construction of belief and pointed to the process of its reification. Since then, anthropologists have recognized the tension between representing belief as socially produced versus reifying it as an inner mental state. Thus, anthropologists Melford Spiro and Roy D'Andrade (1958:456) took belief systems to be "culturally constituted fantasies," which made the anthropologist's task the analysis of how beliefs are transmitted within a group. As a leading scholar in the Durkheimian tradition put it, "delusion is necessary" for belief (in the "sacred"), since the covenant (or social contract) needs to be protected by reifying belief (Douglas 1975:xiv–xv). These scholars identify reification as a social process that constructs an "inner self" (marked by "belief") demarcated from the "social self" in everyday life. The SCB as part of that "inner self" is thus arguably never apart from the reification that makes it appear as a social reality.

Anthropologists frequently pass off "collective representations" (rituals, symbols, stories, myths) as "beliefs" or inner states of individuals (Needham 1972). Needham's sober urgings seem remarkably prescient in the context of cow vigilantism and the SCB. A little later, Dan Sperber (1985:45) underscored the problem by noting that since anthropologists only infer beliefs from what we or they see or hear, "their attributions of beliefs are therefore never incontrovertible." Not surprisingly, some scholars have concluded that they do not find the term "belief" to be useful anymore (Lindquist and Coleman 2008), calling instead for "writing against belief." Although the sacred cow controversy, with its focus on the "rationality" of practices, may have missed an opportunity to raise such questions about beliefs such as the SCB, it is important to remind ourselves that one could understand the cow in Indian culture and society without recourse to beliefs. Sherry Ortner's work on symbols offers such a possibility.

In her insightful essay, Ortner (1973) advances the concept of "key symbols" within a culture. She analytically distinguishes summarizing symbols from elaborating symbols. Summarizing symbols represent a complex society in a summary form. They do not "encourage reflection" but instead "catalyze feelings," demand "attention," allegiance, and "cultural respect." Examples include "sacred symbols" and objects of reverence. In contrast, elaborating symbols are rarely viewed as sacred or as "foci of emotion" (Ortner 1973:1340). They instead invite elaboration (or "sorting out" of experience) by social actors either for conceptual or cognitive ends (thinking) or action-oriented ends (strategies). Thus, elaborating symbols as "root metaphors" enable actors to think in culturally specific ways using the symbol as analogy (e.g., the Indo-Tibetan wheel or cattle for the Dinka), whereas elaborating symbols as "key scenarios" offer culturally appropriate modes of action ("cultural strategies") for organizing experience (e.g., Horatio Alger stories in the United States, formalized rituals, or culturally valued sequence of actions). Ortner's analytic schema raises two questions about the cow in the Indian context: What kind of a symbol is the Indian cow? How "key" is the cow as a symbol in Indian cultural life?

The cow does not lend itself as an elaborating symbol in the above sense. For neither does the cow generate root metaphors nor does it function as a key scenario for Hindus (let alone non-Hindu Indians). Examples of root metaphors for Hindus would be concepts of karma, dharma, caste, hierarchy, rebirth, kama (love), gunas (quality or "substance"), health-related metaphors such as humors, or more material ones such as the Hindu wheel (signifying circular time) or the

13. One scholar cautioned against doing away with the SCB on the grounds that it would "bring an enormous psychological loss" (Ferro-Luzzi in Simoons et al. 1979:479), an assumption without any demonstrated evidence for it and without consideration of whether "social outrage" is akin to "psychological loss."

panchaangam (Hindu calendars with ethnic variants)—all of which aid ordinary Hindus to organize their life experiences and hence their behaviors (Daniel 1984; Kakar and Kakar 2009; Marriott 1976). In contrast, it is hard to find evidence (in legends, proverbs, or ethnographic data) that shows the cow as aiding the categorization and organization of experience. Furthermore, the cow here also compares unfavorably with other elaborating symbols that are modern and secular in content and far more expansive in their appeal, such as the computer, the cell phone, or even the Indian Constitution. Similarly, the cow does not give rise to key scenarios, which are typically stories that model key values such as success, failure, danger, evil/good, and so on. Examples for Hindus would be stories from the Puranas or local legends, figures who appear in the epics and whose lives model (positively or negatively) a way of acting in this world. The cow does not seem to do this either.

However, the cow could be viewed as a summarizing symbol in India, especially since the cow protection movements of the nineteenth century. It has catalyzed "commitment," "feelings," and "attitudes" (Ortner 1973:1342–1343). But note here that for Ortner (1973:1343–1344), commitment is "neither thought nor action," being more about things such as patriotism and faith. In short, commitment is a political act, and the cow as a summarizing symbol acts much like the national flag generating patriotic feelings including cultural respect, although it is also a symbol that evokes cultural fear in the times of vigilantism. Nowhere does Ortner refer to beliefs, and this is in keeping with her Geertzian roots. In a famous formulation, Geertz (1973:90) insisted that it is in the social—and not in people's minds—that we will need to find reasons for why people believe what they (claim to) believe and that beliefs are reified by being clothed "with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations [established by symbols] seem uniquely realistic."

As for the question of how key a summarizing symbol the cow is in India, Ortner provides five criteria for discerning whether a symbol is key within a culture: that natives tell us so, that people cannot be indifferent to it, that it comes up in different contexts, that there is relatively more elaboration of the symbol in the cultural lexicon, and that there are restrictions (some even severe) around it. The cow as a summarizing symbol satisfies only the last of these in any serious manner—that it carries a proscription, a taboo. Each of the others is at best partial: obviously, not all Indians (or all Hindus) think about the cow as a key symbol; many are quite indifferent to it, with the cow appearing in only select cultural contexts and lexicons within specific cults around the cow. More importantly, scholars need not assume that a symbol is key or fixed for eternity. Instead, symbols are better viewed as being made key by social practices and are also discarded as contexts change, although some show more durability. Symbols are thus best viewed as part of the struggle for hegemony, and here we see clearly that particular segments of the population (e.g., orthodox Hindus, Hindutva ideologues, and cow vigilantes) seek to make the cow into a key (perhaps "the key") symbol for India (not only for Hindus). This was articulated recently in a Rajasthan High Court decision in favor of cow protection that also urged the central government to make the cow India's national animal.[14]

Indeed, new social demands are made quite regularly in public culture that seek to place the cow in a key and dominant position as a governing symbol for all Indians. Thus, the legislative bans on beef and cow trading are further justified by demands for budget lines for identification cards for cows and large-scale modern shelters for aged and abandoned cows. Most recently, there has been a demand that vaccines to combat the coronavirus be allowed in India only if they demonstrate that they "do not use cow blood or any product that in any way wound the feelings of followers of the eternal Hindu religion."[15] Ortner's essay allows us to see more clearly how the cow (as symbol) is deployed by actors (Hindutva ideologues and foot soldiers such as cow vigilantes) to organize action in stylized and strategic ways, restructure attitudes, and change social relations. This is a political act by votaries that discursively produces attitudes and actions around the cow. Yet, although the SCB does not appear as a "belief" (an inner state of mind) in such an Ortnerian analysis, it is nonetheless necessary to consider the conditions under which the process of constructing the cow as a key symbol could produce the SCB as a belief. It is to this that we now turn.

In an important intervention, Carlisle and Simon (2012) focus anthropological attention on "believing selves" (i.e., social actors who negotiate multiple meanings of belief). They advance a notion of belief as "a subjective commitment to a truth as being true." Unlike Ortner above, "commitment" here is cognitive—a subjective acknowledgment or negotiation of diverse entities including propositional truths (the strictest standard for belief), moral truths (as in worldview), or socially situated truths (as in "trust" in social relations; Carlisle and Simon 2012:222, 229, 234, endnotes 4, 5). However, by constructing the truth as a contemplative truth by an individual subject (Carlisle and Simon 2012:234, endnote 3), their definition ultimately elides the fundamental social character of beliefs. Furthermore, by insisting on its propositional form ("truth as being true"), they do not account for what Dan Sperber (1982) has called "apparently irrational beliefs," which abound in the world of culture. Modifying their view for our purpose, I take beliefs to be "intersubjective commitments to a truth." Let us explore this further.

14. See https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/rajasthan-high-court-wants-cow-declared-national-animal/article9716927.ece.

15. Swami Chakrapani Maharaj tweeted the following: "The memorandum [we have] given to the President of India is to force multinational entities to declare that any corona vaccine or medicines imported into India do not contain cow's blood or any other item which would wound the feelings of the Hindu eternal religion" (December 29, 2020, translated from Hindi).

Anthropologist Dan Sperber's work has been generative in crafting a materialist view of culture that takes the realm of the symbolic and the domain of cognition seriously (Sperber 1996; see also Whitehouse 2001). For Sperber, beliefs are part of culture, and culture is made up of representations that are communicated and shared within a population. Representations are themselves of two types: mental (in individuals' heads) and public (communicated and interpreted by others as signs). Beliefs, intentions, and preferences are mental representations (Sperber 1996:24). Sperber (1997) identifies two kinds of beliefs in humans: intuitive beliefs that are representations of reality (what he calls "data" or "facts") and reflective beliefs that are metarepresentations (i.e., representations of representations). Whereas we act on an intuitive belief "*as if* it were a representation of an actual state of affairs," Sperber (1997:68) argues that most human beliefs are reflective. Human actors entertain thoughts and cultivate reflective attitudes about the metarepresentations. These attitudes include "doubting, pondering, disbelieving, accepting as a working hypothesis, granting for the sake of argument, etc." (Sperber1997:72). When reflective attitudes develop into a credal attitude—that is, the subject believes the metarepresentation (i.e., that the metarepresentation is true)—then this kind of belief is a reflective belief.

Three points stand out about Sperber's reflective beliefs for our purpose. First, that reflective beliefs are beliefs about representations, not beliefs about "reality" or "facts." They are thus metarepresentations. Second, that unlike intuitive beliefs, which are directly intuited by believers, reflective beliefs *R* require a validating context *V*—a reference frame such as an authoritative reference, divine revelation, explicit argument, or proof that gives credence to the embedded representation (Sperber1997:71) or "common knowledge" (Gergely 2010). Sperber therefore represents reflective beliefs as *V*(*R*). Third, that reflective beliefs are frequently "semipropositional" in content (i.e., ambiguous even to the believer who may not even fully understand it). He argues that humans can (and do) hold beliefs about somethings that our minds are conceptually unable to represent directly (i.e., intuit) as fact (an example he gives is the Christian belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one). Reflective beliefs therefore allow us to "think about them [the content which is a representation]" but not necessarily to "think with them" (Sperber1997:74). Semipropositional content, in other words, holds a believer's attention only with a validating context (and not intuitively).

It follows then that the SCB, if it is to be admitted to exist as a belief, is at best a reflective not intuitive belief in the above sense. It is a reflective belief that is shaped by other people's beliefs and attitudes to belief (rationalizations, authoritative status, trust, exhortations, and allusion to "common knowledge" or assumed knowledge within a population). The SCB, in other words, is not a statement about a fact (that the "cow is sacred"). Let us elaborate with an example. Consider the following speech put out by a religiocultural organization that publicly promotes cow veneration and protection.[16] The speech is exemplary of popular everyday life conversations about the cow. It is in Hindi, the lingua franca of the "cow belt" in India (northern plains that are a Hindutva stronghold). For purposes of analysis, I parse the speech into four sets of statements, with repetitive statements omitted. Each set performs cultural "work" to produce the SCB as a reflective belief.

> Our culture has many religions and thousands of *maanyataa*; among these is one—the worship of the cow. . . . According to the *maanyataa* of Hindu dharma, the cow is needed for rituals of sacrifice and charitable offerings and other religious arrangements.

The word *maanyataa* (usually glossed as "belief") has three senses: "value," "opinion," and "agreement, acceptance, or validation." These senses go together. *Maanyataa* is intersubjective or social affirmation, acceptance, or commitment (to a value or opinion). It does not entail an "inner state" of belief. Interestingly, other Hindi candidates for "belief," such as *vishvas* (trust or faith), *bharosa* (trust or confidence), and the Urdu *yakeen* (assurance or faith), are also intersubjective. They are used to also assure or convince someone else (about something)—thus, the first set claims that "worship of the cow" is a "socially accepted value or opinion" in India. It also contains a "validation" ("Hindu dharma"), although this validation is brought out more clearly in the second set by invoking authoritative sources to bear on the claim.

> While singing the praise of the glory of the cow, "it is said" [*kaha gaya hai*] in the Atharva Veda that the cow is the . . . abode of nectar. . . . Within Indian culture "it is said" that the cow is most holy and "it is also said" that within the cow reside all the gods. Cow's dung and urine are "accepted as" [*maana jaata hai*] holy; cow's milk is "accepted to be" like nectar. "It is said" [*kahaa jaata hai*] that a cancer patient should drink cow urine everyday on an empty stomach.

These sources include scripture, "Indian culture," and "common knowledge" ("it is said," it is "accepted as"). Validation makes it easier or incumbent on the listener to "accept" the representation of the cow (as "holy") on trust.

It is only in the third set that we see what appears to be a "fact" for the believer.

> Cow urine is such a divine medicine on its own that even a fearsome disease such as cancer can be cured. . . . Not only this, standing near the cow cures infection—cold, cough, fevers.

Interestingly, it is not the sacredness of the cow that appears as a fact. Instead, what appears as fact (intuitive belief) are qualities of the cow such as that "cow's urine cures illnesses" or "standing near a cow cures illnesses." They appear as facts, since there is no "validating context" within this set itself, although the larger context of the speech is validating. It is

16. Appearing in an online video titled "Hinduism: Importance of Worshipping Cows."

only this set, which could be an intuitive belief, a representation of a fact within the speaker's mind. This validating context disappears again in the next set, which is the end of the speech.

> In India, cow "is understood" [*samjha jaata hai*] as equal to the earth because this [the cow] gives us so much without asking for anything in return; in these times cow-protection is very necessary in order to keep our ancient traditions alive and simultaneously protect our environment.

Here, we see that the fourth set too uses the phrase "it is understood" (as in common knowledge) to validate what appears to be an empirical or logical reasoning (viz., that the cow and the environment give more than they take and hence deserve protection). It is followed by an exhortation to the listener to show "commitment" by taking up the cause of cow protection.

Lest we think the above speech is nonrepresentative, here are two other examples of public statements that employ similar linguistic codes. In the aftermath of a lynching by cow vigilantes, the chief minister of the state claimed, "Cow is the *maanyataa* here [India]; Muslims can stay, but they will have to stop eating beef." Facing criticism about the statement being anti-Muslim, the chief minister's aide helpfully clarified: "The cow is, for the population of Haryana and all of India, a matter of *aasthaa*. When a majority of people here 'accept' [*maante hain*] that the cow is worshiped then they [Muslims] should not eat beef. This has been given as 'advice' by the chief minister." Now, *aasthaa* refers to "faith-based" opinion or belief. It is good, however, to remind ourselves of Asad's (1993:47) cautionary note about accepting implicit Christian views of belief as "a precondition to knowledge" and a "state of mind" rather than as "a conclusion to a knowledge process" and as "a constituting activity." That *aastha* is followed by *maanyataa* (in the above statement) only underscores the attempt by the aide to represent a "socially accepted" belief as if it were a far more deeply held individual "belief." In Sperber's terms, it attempts "disquotational incontinence" or presenting $V(R)$ as simply R.

Such a linguistic context also holds true for Dravidian languages where "belief" is popularly glossed as *nambikkai* (Kannada, Tamil), *nammika* (Telugu), and *vishwasam* (Malayalam), all of which have roots in "trust" and "faith" rather than a cognitively heavier sense of "belief." Translating such terms simply as "belief" renders the sociological constitution of belief invisible. Claims made in the language of *maanyataa*, *aastha*, or *nambikkai* are better viewed as "resolutions" (D'Andrade 1987)—second-order intentions or intentions to hold an intention. It is in the social actor's mind yet not a fully understood proposition or an intuitive belief. Resolutions or affirmations are generative of reflective attitudes such as "trust" if accompanied by validating contexts such as authoritative sources known to have accepted the representation and value of the sacred cow.

In sum, the difference between intuitive beliefs and reflective attitudes that could become reflective beliefs are crucial for grasping the ontology of the SCB. We can represent it in summary form by considering the following statements: (1) The cow is sacred. (2) I trust Yogi Bazigar (a person) when he said that the cow is sacred. (3) We, Hindus, have always believed that the cow is sacred. (4) It is an eternal truth in the Vedas that the cow is sacred. (5) I know that the cow is sacred, since it gives and gives. Statements 2–5 are reflective beliefs, although we could more confidently say that they are reflective attitudes that are part of social affirmations or commitment to a value that is constantly validated or a resolution (or intention) and attitude about a representation. Only statement 1 qualifies as an intuitive belief. Interestingly, statements about authority implicitly acknowledge the possibility of "doubt" (a reflective attitude) and recognition by speakers that "belief" is produced within a social process of interaction with "believers" over time. The speech is thus an invitation to come to (or become) a believer. The "mental representations" evoked in a listener's mind would be "representations of the speaker's representation of the cow." They are thus metarepresentations of the cow. In turn, the listener develops a range of attitudes, such as deference, doubt, dismissal, interest, simply entertaining the idea as a possibility, and others.

Conclusion

This paper began with the phenomenon of cow vigilantism in India, a scourge that has come to exemplify how claims to beliefs and community are deployed with devastating and violent impact. This phenomenon draws anthropological knowledge into its ambit and thus poses a challenge for public anthropology. At the heart of the cow vigilante actions is the claim over the existence of the SCB, which produces large-scale impunity from the Hindutva state. To make anthropology engage with such a reality, this paper has argued for reminding ourselves of anthropological scholarship around the Indian cow from the late 1950s to the 1970s. In tracing that history of ideas, we find that there are some important insights relevant for today, a viewing of the sacred cow in the Indian context. Two of these are that the Indian cow is not viewed uniformly or self-evidently as sacred, views that steer away from any form of essentialism. Not only do we need to remind ourselves that not all Indians view the cow as sacred but we also need to think about what kind of Hindus tend to such a view. Furthermore, the debates over rationality of Indian farmers (the population that most comes in contact with cows on an everyday basis) at least showed us that farmers cannot be assumed to hold the view of the cow as sacred in any fixed or totalizing manner. They find ways to "rationalize" their actions that may be deemed to be sacrilegious to the cow (such as selective breeding, culling, and sending for slaughter). It turns out then that the SCB needs to be updated given the developments in anthropology over the past five decades since the sacred cow controversy.

Two ways to complicate our view of the SCB, including asking questions of its existence, have been discussed in this paper. While Ortner's symbolic anthropology offers a way to

think about the sacred cow without recourse to beliefs, Sperber's cognitive anthropology allows us to rule out the SCB as an intuitive belief (statement of fact). Treating the sacred cow as a political symbol, we can arguably see how the cow acts as a summarizing (not elaborating) symbol vying with others for hegemony within Indian culture. In other words, we can eschew the SCB entirely and view the sacredness of the cow as being produced by political actors such that they mobilize committed actors not unlike what Atran called "devoted actors." Vigilantes are one effect of this political construction of the cow. Alternatively, or even complementarily, we could follow Sperber and argue that the SCB does exist but not as an intuitive belief about a transhistorical fact ("sacred cow"). Instead, we have argued above that it is a reflective belief emerging intersubjectively when actors adopt reflective attitudes about the cow, including doubt. Such a reflective belief is, however, reified by actors such as cow vigilantes and other votaries who present it as intuitive by "disquoting" (Sperber's term) its validation context.

Any representation of the SCB without critically assessing its ontological character aids in its reification. The SCB is a politically produced entity in the Indian public sphere, shaped within power struggles for group mobilization purposes. It is conferred with an aura of "sacredness" that attempts to place it beyond the realm of doubt and questioning by nonbelievers. Mystifying the SCB is an act of depoliticization. Here the homogenization of "Hindus" accompanies reification of the SCB. If anthropological knowledge continues to simply assume the SCB as a widespread intuitive belief, then it is not so different from cow vigilante claims about the hoary existence of a SCB—an instantiation of the violence of casteism in anthropological clothing.

Acknowledgments

I thank three anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments and suggestions, the commentators for their engagement, and the editors for their encouragement and patience. Maria Kromidas, Ram Mahalingam, and Suraj Jacob read early versions of this paper and graciously offered feedback.

Comments

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Balmurli Natrajan offers a timely and, given the violence of cow vigilantism, urgent deconstruction of the sociological, moral, and ontological premises framing the sacred cow belief (SCB). Scrutinizing claims made about the antiquity, ubiquity, and legitimacy of the SCB by Hindu nationalist organizations, he interrogates anthropological (mis)understandings and depictions of the nature of belief. During fieldwork in rural Tamil Nadu, the affection and reverence that farmers have for their cattle was epitomized during Pongal, the quintessential Tamil harvest festival. On the second day, called Bovine Pongal, cattle are titivated, pampered, and offered worship in recognition of their vitality to agriculture. Yet these same farmers had few qualms about selling old cows and bulls, exhausted of their utility, to Kerala, knowing that they would be butchered for meat (Srinivas 1962; Staples 2020). Increasing recourse to technology and dwindling cattle rearing prompted me to quip, "Soon, Cattle Pongal will give way to Tractor Pongal?" (Narayanan 2016). Such unsentimental practicality, coexisting with the cherishing and worship of cattle, challenges any facile objectification of the "inviolability of the cow" for Hindus. Doubt and scepticism are fundamental to grappling with "belief." Challenging espousals of increasingly threadbare utilitarian reasons (cow as singularly useful), Natrajan focuses on the social production of the SCB by Hindu fundamentalists. Interrogating the increasing adoption of unsubstantiated moral or affective claims (cow as irrefutably sacred), he disputes any automatic recourse to and uncritical reification of the notion of belief not just among cow protection advocates but also some anthropologists. In the process, Natrajan attempts to cultivate an "ethnography of doubt."

Many critiques of the SCB have emphasized, and rightly so, power struggles over the cow both as meat and as metaphor. Highlighting the ethnic, religious (Hindu vs. Muslim), caste (upper vs. Dalit Bahujans), and class hierarchies that have been imposed on cattle, these readings challenge notions of the sacred cow as a generalized Hindu belief and reiterate its selective resonance and indeed strategic political deployment. While acknowledging these critiques of empirical reality deviating from the exaggerated rhetoric of the SCB, Natrajan delves deeper to probe the ontological premises of and the epistemological methods for ascertaining "belief." This effort also implicates anthropologists and their analytics. Since they can only be inferred, from actions and articulated discourses, and conferred by what actors or analysts see and hear, beliefs are never as substantial or unassailable as they are made to appear. Therefore, Natrajan focuses on making visible how beliefs, rather than being individual states of mind, are socially produced and reinforced. Committed political actors evoke sacredness for the cow to mobilize other devoted acolytes to their Hindu nationalist cause. Mystifying the SCB, reducing it to an intuitive belief among a homogenized depiction of Hindus, not only means ignoring its brutal and sometimes fatal implications but also entails anthropological complicity in the violence of casteism.

This detailed unraveling of the linguistic codes through which the SCB is rendered resonant, unquestioned, and "factual" is salutary. Given the focus on political symbolism and power struggles, however, further insights into the violence inherent to the symbolism and discursive mechanics themselves, especially for Muslims, Christians, and Dalit Bahujans,

are possible. The lynching of those accused of trading and eating cows is but the culmination of deeper and more insidious cycles of violence. Symbols themselves maim and kill, if not physical bodies, then vulnerable psyches. Preceding and fueling the physical violence is the symbolic violence inherent in processes of shaming, marginalization, exclusion, othering, and dehumanization. Anthropologists are complicit in casteism, not only through the reification of hegemonic assertions as general beliefs. Through privileging upper-caste discourses, at the expense of alternatives from other caste, class, or religious locations, anthropologists engage in epistemic violence that further entrenches extant hierarchies.

The move to elevate the cow, above all other animals, itself epitomizes the hierarchical calculus underpinning Hindu caste dynamics. Even as Natrajan is careful to note that the cow is one among many symbols competing for primacy in Indian culture, a question resounds: Why the cow? In *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism*, Kancha Ilaiah (2004) offers another salient animal that did not become a widely resonant symbol. Centering the buffalo and its material and cultural associations, Ilaiah grapples with the insidious effects of cow symbolism, specifically on Dalit Bahujan thinking, lifeways, and psyches. Buffalo are more productive both as milch and draught animals, offering more and richer milk, larger quantities of meat, and sturdier labor. They are more common in households. Unlike the cow, they are native to South Asia and hold tremendous cultural significance for Dalit Bahujans. If utility underpinned distinction, then buffalo would have a greater claim to sanctity. Yet not only is its worth not acknowledged but the buffalo is also symbolically denigrated (for its blackness, as the vehicle of the god of death, as a demon killed by the goddess Durga and the epitome of evil) in orthodox Hindu ideologies. As the repressed and derided shadow of the more prestigious cow, suppression of and silence about the buffalo, except to castigate, are also part of political efforts (more latently) to produce bovine sanctity and entrench caste, class, and religious hierarchies. Why was the buffalo unable, or rather not allowed, to become more generally meaningful? Challenging the ontological premises of publicly enunciated discourses does challenge reification. Additionally, revealing the concurrent suppression and invisibilization of other marginalized and silenced valuations can also unravel mystification to shed more light on the sociopolitical mechanics of producing hegemonic "beliefs." As Natrajan rightly notes, mystification entails depoliticization. Similarly, not attending sufficiently to the deliberately suppressed, silenced, and denied alternatives during the course of fomenting hegemonic "beliefs" can obscure from view the structural and symbolic violence attendant to the very processes of symbolization and discourse formation. Drawing attention to the existence of viable competing values and how they have been deliberately suppressed reiterates the contingency, even fragility, of seemingly immutable systems and beliefs as well as the oppressive casteist powers that produce, sustain, and reproduce them. Denuding them of the "aura of sacredness" they claim, this not only subjects "beliefs" to doubt and critical scrutiny but also paves the way for alternative, more inclusive imaginaries.

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On Viennas, Violence, and Disgust

I begin this commentary on Balmurli Natrajan's "Being Vigilant about Sacred Cows: On Belief and Violence in India" with an account from a primary school classroom in distant Johannesburg. My account is a composite scene built from different encounters between vegetarian and meat-eating young people in urban South Africa. At the center of the scene that I am describing are Viennas and a six-year-old boy I call Ben. Viennas are succulent sausages made of parboiled pork, beef, or chicken popular in various parts of the world. Ben's classmates enjoy them, but he finds Viennas "disgusting." Ben is vegetarian like his parents. Ben's school friends are other children from middle-class households of different racial backgrounds. On the day that I am recounting, Ben loudly proclaimed that he could not stand the sight of Viennas in his classmate's lunch box. Viennas are "slimy" and "yucky," he insisted. Ben's protests against the sight of Viennas in a classmate's lunch box were pointed and belittling. The classmate stepped away from her snack and started crying.

At least two circuits of offense and hurt came alive that day in Johannesburg: (*a*) the hurt and offense that Ben, who disliked (dare I say abhorred) Viennas, experienced and (*b*) the hurt that the child on the receiving end of Ben's disgust felt. The schoolteacher sought to calm the situation. In her conversations with the children, she tried to accommodate Ben's dislike for Viennas. It was acceptable, she said, to feel offended at the sight of them. Nevertheless, she noted, Ben must "self-regulate" and "tolerate" other people's choice of food and snacks. She also asked the crying six-year-old girl to try and contain herself, not burst into tears, but "stand up for herself" and for her "right" to eat what she wants.

South Africa is physically and, in many respects, socially distant from India. Nevertheless, both places are part of a discursive regime where notions of disgust, offence, and hurt, as well as tolerance, self-regulation, and rights, have varying degrees of hold on social life. These discourses uphold the category of offence. Ben's teacher posited his reaction as a natural outcome of his aversion to meat. The teacher did not invoke any beliefs in the sacredness of animal life to legitimate Ben's aversion; nevertheless, she reified the experience of disgust and the idea of offence.

Natrajan's contribution in this volume allows us to track the modes through which the idea of offense and the habit of getting offended are instituted. As he works through the academic debates on the sacred cow belief (SCB), Natrajan enables us to question the apparently indelible link between beliefs,

sanctity, the experience of violation, claims of offense, and the forms of hurt and violence that have been enacted in multiple contexts—as a response to that offence. He demonstrates that beliefs do not rest in a person's mind but emerge through a constituting process, a process through which knowledge and experience are produced. Drawing on Talal Asad and Dan Sperber, Natrajan reminds us of the simple yet critical sociological fact that authoritative arguments, other people's invocations, exhortations, and references about the object and subject of that belief make up the context in which a belief is constituted as belief.

In contemporary India, as Natrajan notes, organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) are the social producers of the SCB. Their propaganda machine asserts this belief as a real extant phenomenon while consistently producing and reproducing it. Members of the VHP and allied groups have also been the key protagonists of the violence done in the name of the SCB—to purportedly protect cows and proclaim their sacredness and inviolability. These cow vigilantes equate protection of cows with aggression, hurt, and violence against those who are seen to impinge on the sanctity of cows. Marginal sections of Muslim and Dalit communities have been the most frequent victims of this violence (HRW 2019; Parth 2023). Members of these communities become targets of the cow protectors' violence not only because of their association with occupations that involve killing or skinning animals but also because they are deemed violable and deserving candidates for violence. Disgust associated with these communities and their work plays a key role here. Stigma, stench, reprehension, and disgust are part of the affective politics that perpetuates the SCB and its violence.

A number of scholars have closely studied the role of disgust in reinforcing caste hierarchies (Hasan, Huq, and Nussbaum 2018; Kapoor 2023; Kikon 2022; Lee 2021; Waghmore and Contractor 2015). Others, such as Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi (2012), have analyzed how disgust and righteous vegetarianism underpinned the 2002 pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat. It enabled both the violence of Hindutva sympathizers and the complicity of thousands who looked away—silently acquiescing in their own fashion—to the notion that impure meat-eating communities that butcher animals deserve the violence inflicted on them. As this scholarship and familiarity with Indian social life reveals, it is a fraught place. The pervasive caste order is segregational in spirit and practice. Notions of purity and pollution and associated iterations of abhorrence and reprehension have produced a context that not only limits the possibilities of empathy but also makes large sections of the population active agents of or quietly acquiescent in the violence against those seen as disgusting or impure (Kapoor 2018). That is what the Gujarat pogrom and everyday acts of aggression against those deemed lower down the caste hierarchy show. Violence in the name of the cow and the SCB are part and parcel of this larger violent order.

Invocations and authoritative exhortations produce not only the conditions for belief in sacredness of an object but also the disgusted subject. This disgusted subject finds certain objects and acts of associating with or partaking in them reprehensible. Protestations that perform disgust and reprehension are central to the hurt and violence that proceeds from them. Repertoires of disgust against individuals, communities, and objects are taught, felt, apprehended, circulated, and naturalized. Each time disgust is enacted—against those who work with cow hides or eat beef or Viennas—a new circuit of reprehension is activated, giving it new force and life.

On the day that I have described above, Ben's schoolteacher accommodated and further reproduced the vegetarian's repertoire of disgust. That context was also fraught. Ben's postapartheid Johannesburg classroom was made up of children of different races. Ben was white, whereas the girl he belittled for her food choices was "colored" (Adhikari 2009; Biko 1978).[17] Their parents had similar occupational backgrounds, but large gaps exist in the social status and privilege that their families have historically enjoyed. Food choices and preferences among black communities (here I am including "colored" in the category of "black")[18] for relatively cheaper proteins or processed meats like Viennas are part of that history of racialized life in South Africa. Apartheid South Africa is also the place where care for animal life among many white families consistently superseded consideration for black life. And it continues to be a country where whiteness makes and remakes itself through environmentalism, care for other species, and nature (Daya 2023; Green 2020).[19]

Against this backdrop, what else and more could Ben's schoolteacher have done? She emphasized tolerance for other people's food choices and their right to consume the food they want. Could she have also questioned Ben's disgust at the sight of Viennas? In other words, could she have challenged the scripts of whiteness that Ben had probably begun learning at an early age? Perhaps she could have offered him modes of caring for animal life in ways that are not driven by aversion for meat and meat eaters.

These questions are not entirely polemical or speculative. While living and working in postapartheid South Africa for the past 13 years, I have seen schoolteachers and others do all

17. A coinage that emerged in the wake of 1950s Population Registration Acts in apartheid South Africa, "colored" refers to members of mixed race heritage. White supremacist ideology stigmatized them as unwholesome products of miscegenation. At the same time, the apartheid state positioned "coloreds" as a middle minority between whites and the African majority who were granted petty privileges and economically and socially marginalized through the long twentieth century. Since 1994, "colored" has also emerged as a mode of self-identification referencing distinct cultural heritage and awareness. That said, at various junctures, political movements guided by Steven Bantu Biko's writings and black consciousness philosophy have subsumed "colored" in the more expansive category of "black," referring to all subjugated groups under apartheid irrespective of governmental gradations. Blackness, in Biko's sense, is offered and lived by many members of the community.

18. See 17n for explanation.

19. See Daya (2023) for a nuanced way of thinking about the relationship between race and meat consumption in South Africa.

of this and more to obtain a more equal and considerate classroom or work setting and a more just social order. But can aversion or disgust also be undone in the Indian context? Can the thread, which connects respect for different forms of life and belief in the sanctity of cows to repudiation and violence in their name, be broken? I do not have a clear and concise answer to that question. But questioning claims about "the hoary existence of a SCB" as Natrajan has done is one small but important step in the process.

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Having spent considerable time in Varanasi carrying out fieldwork along the sacred Ganga River, I often marveled at the large bovines strolling along the steep steps along the river front (ghats) and the city streets, where they would often halt traffic. Cows were also regular visitors in our neighborhood, foraging in the open rubbish dumps and ingesting all sorts of waste, from plastic bags to election posters on the wall.

Most neighborhood cows that roamed local dumps had owners who would release them during the day to graze on waste, with the animals returning home by evening (see Doron 2021). These bovines followed predictable routines and paths, fostering meaningful long-term relationships with locals characterized by regular acts of affection and indeed veneration. Some neighbors would keep some food in the house, leaving it out for the cows in the early mornings. The more discerning cows would even knock their heads on the wooden doors, lest householders forget to feed them. In those early mornings one had to carefully navigate the "land mines" left behind by the bovines. Surely, such expressions of care, routine feedings, and communication by ordinary people are expressions of venerating the sacred cow? Balmurli Natrajan's insightful article certainly agrees that they "do tend to treat the cow as a special animal and worthy of worship or veneration."

Yet, he persuasively argues, it would be a mistake to equate such behaviors with a universally ingrained sacred cow belief (SCB) in Hindu culture. In his lucid description of the sacred cow controversy in anthropology, Natrajan shifts the discussion and brings to bear valuable insights in symbolic and cognitive anthropology. He offers a rich perspective on belief, presenting it as a dynamic political and symbolic construct rather than a fixture in the Hindu mind. This approach underscores the complexities and variations in how the sacred cow is perceived and treated these days.

This brings me back to my recent visits to Varanasi, where I noticed that cows were progressively disappearing from public spaces. The once common sight of cows wandering Varanasi's streets has dwindled during Narendra Modi's tenure as prime minister. As part of his Clean India Mission and the sweeping changes brought by the Kashi Corridor project, Varanasi has undergone a significant facelift. Hindu cultural icons and architectural grandeur now dominate the landscape, showcasing the unapologetic cultural nationalism of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But where was the venerated sacred cow in all of this Hindu splendor?

The prime minister's emphasis on transforming religious sites and his development agenda to present a clean, business-ready India necessitated the removal of disruptive elements—from street beggars to, yes, the sacred roaming cows. Municipal efforts have intensified to remove stray bovines, with trucks designated to transport these animals presumably to outskirts areas or cow shelters. Following Natrajan's insights we might ask, If observable behaviors suggest the existence of belief, how do we reconcile both the veneration and the expulsion of sacred cows?

The disappearance of the sacred cow from Varanasi's public spaces starkly contrasts with its heightened symbolic presence in Hindu nationalism under BJP rule. For Natrajan, this should not surprise us, for even as the cow's physical presence may have declined, its symbolic importance persists within communal narratives peddled by Hindutva ideologues. He demonstrates that it takes concerted effort and constant validation to render the cow a potent moral and symbolic actor—a key symbol that transcends its tangible existence to embody broader cultural and religious sentiments.

Yet the sad irony is that such reification and deification of the cow conceals a much darker reality—for humans and bovines alike. These days, both Muslims and low-caste individuals, particularly Dalits, are victimized under the guise of protecting the sacred cow, which is tied to notions of motherhood and nationhood. Self-styled cow vigilantes carry out brutal attacks on those suspected of slaughtering, distributing, or consuming beef. In Gujarat in 2016, when higher-caste Hindus wrongly accused Dalits of killing cows and subsequently assaulted them, the Dalits responded by refusing to remove dead animals from public places—the ritually polluting jobs they are commonly charged with (Doron and Jeffrey 2018:33).

Yamini Narayanan's (2023) recent book, *Mother Cow, Mother India*, sheds light on the harsh realities faced by sacred cows, detailing the daily brutality and suffering these animals endure. Her book details the cruelty inflicted on lactating cows across various stages—dairying, live animal markets, transportation, and even in shelters and temples that are ostensibly designed to protect them. As Narayanan forcefully argues, the sacred cow has become a crucible reflecting the dynamics of power within complex social and economic structures, including anthropocentrism, sectarianism, casteism, and patriarchy. Here too the SCB forms the basis for which various oppressive systems, from Hindu chauvinist movements to animal agriculture, operate in interlinked and reinforcing ways (Narayanan 2023:12).

Despite their sacred status, many cows in India suffer neglect and mistreatment, highlighting a stark contrast between cultural ideals and practical realities. Balmurli Natrajan's article makes an excellent contribution to anthropological debates about belief and reminds us that the SCB remains in the realm of the political

(rather than "fact") and reflects deeper sociopolitical dynamics in modern India. State and nonstate actors have actively sought to celebrate and worship the cow as transcendent and universal, yet the actual treatment of cows especially in industry often reveals significant neglect and suffering, highlighting the disparity between myth and reality.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by an Australian Research Grant (DP 190100823).

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Hindutva Affect and the Pragmatic Agriculturalist

Jagdish, a garment dealer in Lucknow, is showing me his family's agricultural land in their ancestral village in Bara Banki District. They own two modest plots along a dirt road: a wet field of just-transplanted spearmint and a field of green, still-tender wheat. Suddenly, we hear shouts. A neighboring farmer is cursing and waving a bamboo staff at something we cannot see, as his fields are separated from Jagdish's by a mango grove. Moments later, a bull charges out of the grove and through Jagdish's fields, trampling mint and wheat as Jagdish swears and finds a clod of earth to hurl at it.

To have spent time in rural Uttar Pradesh in recent years is to have witnessed scenes of this kind. Following the Modi administration's ban on the sale and purchase of cattle for slaughter in 2017, the state government's crackdown on slaughterhouses in the same year, and the concomitant surge in cow protection vigilantism by Hindu supremacist groups at the local level, farmers have increasingly abandoned cows and bulls that have outlived their utility, rather than quietly selling them to meat traders as before. Crop destruction by the consequently expanded population of unclaimed livestock has become an acute economic problem—farmers speak of losing 30% of their yields as a result—and a political liability for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party that has championed the cow protection measures (PTI 2024). "The government says that the cow is our mother," a farmer told journalist Tushar Dhara (2019), "but they have led us to conflict with our mothers." The widely reported "stray cattle menace" has led farmers to lock cattle in government schools to force administrative response and to strike cows with canes to keep them out of their fields (Dhara 2019; PTI 2024; Slater 2019), actions that pointedly raise the question at the heart of the present essay by Balmurli Natrajan—how, in our current political context, are claims of a generalized Hindu belief in the sacrality of cows to be assessed?

Natrajan is surely correct to urge a hermeneutics of suspicion regarding the sacred cow belief (SCB) and to argue that its representation by Hindu nationalists "reifies the SCB by presenting a historical, moral, and political claim as but an expression of an always already existing state of mind." Fundamentally in agreement with Natrajan, I would further develop his argument in two ways tied to the two quite distinct phenomena conflated under much of the popular discourse on cow sacrality.

First, the SCB imputed to a Hindu mass public on the grounds of popular practices (feeding, reverential touching, tolerating in public space) warrants disaggregated study (which communities or individuals, in fact, undertake any or all of these practices) and may be better understood, for some of the larger groups involved (such as farmers, who may do more tolerating than reverential touching), as little more than acceptance of a caste-based division of agrarian labor in which the end of animal life is the appropriate domain of Dalits and Muslims. Natrajan notes M. N. Srinivas's observation from rural Karnataka: "while the peasant does not want to kill the cow or bull himself he does not seem to mind very much if someone else does the dirty job out of his sight." In Uttar Pradesh the stray cattle crisis in the aftermath of the BJP's cow protection measures shows that the economy implicit in Srinivas's remark—a system in which farmers sell post-use cattle to traders in beef and leather—has long been the norm. The now routine wielding of lathis against stray cattle by Uttar Pradesh farmers further illustrates the folly of ascribing to Hindu agriculturalists en bloc a timeless commitment to ahimsa or cow reverence.

Second, Hindu supremacist representations of the SCB—which Natrajan rightly depicts as attempts to conjure a unity that does not exist—have less to do with belief as ordinarily conceived than with the inculcation of affective dispositions motivating agonistic collective action. In the Hindutva materials Natrajan considers, there are indeed usages of "belief" (*viśvās, mānyatā*) on display; I suggest that this reflects the centrality of belief in liberal understandings of religion and the purchase on state institutions that adoption of this idiom affords. The legal cover "belief" provides may help explain its prominence in the justificatory discourse that follows majoritarian violence. Beforehand, though, when Hindu supremacist mobilizations are underway, appeals to "belief" regarding cows, when made at all, are thoroughly eclipsed by elicitations of disgust (*ghṛṇā*) and hatred (*nafrat*) toward those who allegedly kill or eat them. Examples are many: one might point to Hindu nationalists telling tribal Kandhas that their Dalit Christian neighbors are baptized in water mixed with cow flesh (Hota 2024:141) or to the instrumentalization of disgust at meat eating in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012) or to paradigm-setting Hindutva texts that characterize Muslims as "those eaters of cow flesh" "who day and night [let] loose rivers of blood by murdering harmless goats and . . . [bovine] animals" (quoted in Lee 2021:318). Recently, a series of twinned exhortations appeared in English in white paint all over the road

medians in an upscale neighborhood in Lucknow: first came "Be Vegetarian" followed by "Hate Non-Veg." Is belief a salient category in making sense of such instances? What is in evidence is a project of inculcating affective dispositions.

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Does the sacred cow belief (SCB) relate to something called the "Hindu mind"? In reading Balmurli Natrajan's article on the shaping of the commonsense regarding the SCB through anthropological knowledge production in the 1970s, especially on the Hindu mind, I am driven to remember the famous nineteenth-century Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's short story "Mahesh." Mahesh is the name of a much-loved bull domesticated in the household of a Muslim farmer Gofoor who is trying to survive a drought-ridden summer amid the tyranny of a Brahman zamindar. As the bull starves for lack of grass or hay, Gofoor, being deeply in debt within the conditions of zamindari land ownership, is forced to kill his beloved bull, with whom he shares a relationship of an agrarian parent. He and his daughter leave the village after this event and head for the jute mills that are then coming up in the nearby towns, hoping for a less tyrannical condition for survival there.

I am, to a great extent, in agreement with Natrajan's claim that there is a difference between a belief that stems from a perception of reality and one that stems from a cognitive condition, as has otherwise been argued (the SCB being a character of the Hindu mind). I want to predicate my comment on the question, What is the Hindu mind? In considering a social taboo, is there room to consider the character of a collective mind? Drawing on these questions from Natrajan's canvas, let me say first that the SCB as ideological form is much older than the modern forms of Hindutva politics and therefore cannot be considered an invention by the political and ideological machine of Hindutva. For the purpose of engaging closely with Natrajan, I am more concerned with the thesis that there is or may be a collective mind, of any sort, that collectively perceives a reality in a neat way. Natrajan mentions that the cow was considered sacred in ancient texts, contextually, because it belonged to the Brahman owner, not because it itself was something sacred. Meat eating and animal sacrifice were widely noticed—famously, in the form of the *asvamadha yajna* (the horse sacrifice ritual), which is mentioned in the Mahabharata and in the Vedas as a ritual to bring the king's strength to the maximum proportions.

To me, Natrajan's thesis about perception and cognition are intertwined. Perception of a reality—in this case the sacrality of the cow—through structures of power and ideology (I take my understanding of the word "ideology" from the work of Louis Althusser) also does not take place evenly or neatly. So, from Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's short story, I glean two elements that may help harness my argument in this regard better. One, that the option of a city jute mill employment gives the occasion of a rupture in the communitarian living in which a Muslim farmer is dominated not only economically by arrangements of land ownership and revenue extraction but also ritually, as he exists at the absolute margin of the village society. Second, we also see ideology work in a way that he internalizes to an extent Brahmanical culture and ritual preferences, if not out of will, then at least out of the absence of any other survival option. Chatterjee very subtly shows ideological persuasion and coercion working in tandem with each other. It does not concern me that various anthropologists and geographers have "reified" the SCB as a standard format condition of Hindu existence and ritual structure—that this is only unevenly true is also not of concern to me. I am most interested, though, in the anthropological conviction to which Natrajan also in part concedes, that there is a collective mind—which is a collective cognitive apparatus.

What is culture—is it a collective mind? I am remembering Geertz's (1973) invocation of Max Weber's thesis—culture as a web of meaning. Such an ecosystem of webs does not make any claim on the interiority of the subject—the mind or the consciousness. In Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), we do get something close to the thesis of a collective mind, that is, the thesis of a collective effervescence. This is also outwardly manifestation of internalized belief, but there cannot be an inference that there is a collective cognitive apparatus that evenly perceives reality or performs cognition uniformly. On the other hand, even if—like in the case of Muslim farmer Gofoor—there is an evenly held belief of the cow's sacrality, it cannot be extended to a claim of free belief. By this, I mean that belief is always already washed through a smokescreen of ideological training that holds together a stable version of the world and one's location in it. Gofoor shares in the cow-love-sacred ideological complex, and there are many reasons behind it. His guilt and passionate outcry at the death of the bull is not disingenuous. Yet he knows very well that he is coerced into paying homage to Brahmanical culture and chooses to leave that society behind, as the circumstances become quite desperate for him.

Natrajan finally uses Sherry Ortner's "key symbols" thesis to argue that the cow is arguably not a key symbol of Hindu life. I disagree with Natrajan's invocation of Sperber's taxonomy of beliefs—mental and public, intuitive and reflective—as being entirely separate. I argue that the mental and the intuitive can also be a deeply internalized version of power, hierarchical or authoritative social arrangement, and pushes and tugs at hegemony. This boundary between the inside and the outside seems specious to me. I also think that to make quick jumps from ancient Vedic texts to the various examples of hypernationalist Hindutva utterances of the past hundred years makes the article temporally discontinuous and weakens the argumentative force of the article. I, finally, would invite

Natrajan to consider more closely the claim of a collective mind, which he does not in the end strongly attack or defend.

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> *I, for one, eat it, provided it is tender* (amsala). (Yajnavalkya, *Satapatha Brahmana*, iii.1.2.21)
>
> *An ascetic who, invited to dine at a sacrifice . . . rejects meat shall go to hell for as many years as the slaughtered beast has hairs.* (*Vasishtha Sutra*, XI.34)

In ancient India, the sacrifice of the cow and the consumption of its meat by the participants, nearly all Brahman, was de rigueur in many rituals. The two quotations above, the first from approximately eighth to sixth century BCE and the second from approximately third to first century BCE, are among many that testify to the prevalence of beef eating among kings and priests. Sacrifice, the circulation of food, and human procreation were continuities in human existence, and Yajnavalkya points to the centrality of eating to a sense of self and order. Francis Zimmermann (1987) observed wryly that "what we in Europe, in the classical period, called the chain of being, is presented in India as a sequence of foods." There is little solace to be found for those who look to scriptural tradition to justify the claim that the cow is sacred to Hindus, occupying the status of a mother, and therefore not to be killed and, most certainly, not eaten. There is, of course, the general sentiment among Hindus, Jains, and so on that animals ought to be respected and cared for. As Natrajan points out, this behavioral aspiration should be seen separately from the ideology of cow protection, which is a relatively modern phenomenon, indeed, of the colonial period.

Since the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism from the 1990s and the formation of a central government informed by a radical Hindu ideology in 2014, instances of attacks on Muslims and Dalits for dealing in the killing of cattle for consumption have increased. Between 2014 and 2023, there were about 50 incidents of lynchings, in what has come to be known as the phenomenon of cow vigilantes. In 2018 the Supreme Court of India was moved to issue a series of directives for "preventive, remedial, and punitive" measures to check this form of mob violence. It is significant that fewer than five of these incidents happened in southern India, a region that has proved to be less susceptible to the Hindutva virus. Like the mid-nineteenth-century cow protection movements of which this current spate is seen as the "latest manifestation" by Natrajan, these occurrences are not an all-India phenomenon and demand a regional and conjunctural explanation. A preponderant majority of these attacks have happened in northern states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh) characterized by low levels of literacy and economic development, where the Bharatiya Janata Party has established itself through its rhetoric of Hindus in danger.

Lata Mani (1998) famously observed about the debates around sati, or widow burning, in the early nineteenth century that women were merely the site on which the idea of tradition was fought over. Patriarchal Hindu men and reformers were more concerned about the prospect of colonial intervention in local customs and how that could compromise a defense of national culture. Similarly, in the case of cow protection, it is less the cow that is the issue than the promotion of an aggressive Hinduism that is still in search of unifying issues in a society divided by caste. The Dalit and the Muslim become the convenient scapegoats in the cause of a purified Hindu identity (Menon 2024). Beef is eaten all over the northeast of India and the state of Kerala. Dalits, Christians, and Muslims eat beef, so the killing of cows becomes an emotive issue largely among *savarnas* if at all. More than 70% of Indians are meat eaters, and the country accounts for 54% of the world's buffalo meat (buff) production. Thus, the issue of cow protection is not a pan–South Asian phenomenon and can largely be considered a politically manufactured issue associated with a *savarna* Hindu politics in search of a national agenda.

The question remains why studies of cow protection immediately engage in the Orientalist enterprise of arguing in terms of the Hindu mind and the cow as icon, an issue that is of little concern for the *avarna* population as well as India's religious minorities. Once we move away from an anthropological emphasis on culture, we could ask material and conjunctural questions about the cattle economy of northern India. The movement for cow protection emerged first not within a Hindu community but among the Namdhari (Kooka) Sikhs in the 1860s and was picked up later by Hindu reform movements like the Arya Samaj. The cow protection riots of the late nineteenth century in the Indo-Gangetic plain (the cattle heartland) arose after a spate of famines that resulted in death of cattle central to the economy (Mishra 2013, 2015; Oliver 2023; Satya 2007). It is not without significance that the caste central to the movement that emerged were the Ahirs, a pastoralist group aspiring to social mobility (Pandey 1990). Arguably, we need to look at material and conjunctural factors more closely, rather than a presumed South Asian "alimentary habitus" (Roy 2021).

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Holy Cow! Cowpathy, Cow Science Exams, and Other Bovine Musings

It is difficult if not impossible to be Indian (indeed South Asian) and be oblivious to the politics of food. Food is central to social life. In India, each state has its own distinctive cuisine. Within

each state, cuisines are shaped by caste, class, and religion. Towns on the border between states develop their own fusion cuisine. Each swears by their unique cuisine. But food is also intensely policed. Growing up as an upper-caste Brahman, food taboos were ubiquitous, and I was schooled in the moral politics of vegetarianism. It was not a personal preference of taste but rather a potent ideology of purity, one where vegetarianism was considered a righteous and superior choice. In my teenage years, I challenged the orthodoxy and became a meat eater as an exercise in rebellion, an amusing counterpoint to my American friends who rebelled into vegetarianism.

As Balmurli Natrajan argues in "Being Vigilant about Sacred Cows," while vegetarianism is celebrated as a key aspect of Hinduism, cow politics vary across India. Many states, especially anticaste movements have long histories of challenging beef bans (Doshi 2017; Times of India 2017). As Natrajan argues, while the sacred cow belief (SCB) shifts over history, we live in times where we are witnessing a mammoth retelling of Indian history, one that aligns with contemporary Hindu nationalism and its vision of a Hindu India. Natrajan has corralled numerous pieces of anthropological evidence to make a compelling case for understanding the cow within its cultural, regional, political, and historical contexts.

Working in the field of feminist science and technology studies, I am drawn to his argument in multiple ways. My interest in Hindu nationalism comes from its curious relationship with modern science and technology. Rather than reject modern science and its Western roots, Hindu nationalists claim modern science and technology as an extension of the ancient Vedic sciences. They have thus selectively and strategically used rhetoric from science and Hinduism, modernity and orthodoxy, Western and Eastern thought to build a powerful but dangerous vision for a Hindu India. They bring a pride in an ancient past, the purported wisdom of the Vedas, and a modern future into visions of an archaic modernity (Subramaniam 2019).

This archaic modernity is everywhere in contemporary India. During the recent pandemic, we saw both vaccine development and the mobilizing of the sacred cow. There were symbolic offerings and drinking of the sacred cow urine *gaumutra* by the All India Hindu Mahasabha (Irish 2020), and even the government's Ministry of Alternate Medicine (AYUSH) issued directives promoting dubious preventive measures and prophylactics, such as cow urine, ginger, and turmeric. Like allopathy and homeopathy, we have cowpathy, now commercialized into numerous profitable products (Subramaniam 2021). Narendra Modi, India's current prime minister, set up a National Cow Commission that touted the scientific basis of ancient Hindu wisdom of cows. The commission set up a curriculum that includes claims that Indian cows have more emotions than foreign ones and that their humps contain a solar pulse that allows them to absorb vitamin D that can be released into their milk. In contrast, the humpless Jersey cows have no such powers! They even devised a cow science exam, which was postponed because of an outcry (Gettleman and Raj 2021). There is a journal called *Indian Cow* and a Love 4 Cow Trust that seeks to promote love for cows (Biswas 2015). It is this unique blend of science and Vedic religion that is pervasive in contemporary India. This retelling is part of a larger revisionism of Indian history—where Hindus are presented as autochthonous to India while all others are foreigners, indeed conquerors.

But this vision is entirely fiction. Surveys show that there is less vegetarianism and more beef eating than usually claimed (Natrajan and Jacob 2018). India continues to be the world's largest exporter of beef—80% is buffalo meat (Biswas 2015). India's early Hindu nationalist leaders did not embrace ahimsa, or nonviolence. Veer Savarkar's celebrated treatise *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* strongly critiqued the principle of ahimsa, and he was not against eating beef. Swami Vivekananda was a meat eater and famously remarked that India needed "beef, biceps and the Bhagavad Gita" (Gittinger 2017). While Muslim and Dalit beef eaters and sellers have been targeted, it is interesting that the vast majority (95%) of the powerful beef traders are Hindus (Mishra 2015).

While eating beef is reviled as sacrilegious, the cow is ubiquitously celebrated as the "mother," the giver of life. Products such as milk, urine, and dung are celebrated both as sacred and medicinal. While the cow is venerated, evidence from dairy farms and gaushalas, or cow shelters, do not present a pretty picture (Dave 2017; Sharma, Schuetze, and Phillips 2020). Animals are exploited as are a poor and racialized labor force that supports India's dairy production. In short, milk production is neither benign nor nonviolent. (Narayanan 2023). Cows are not protected. One study found that many cows roam the streets looking for food. In a city like Raipur, there is one street cow for every 54 human residents (Intagliata 2021).

Narayanan (2016) argues that the cow mother is embraced as an instrument of nation building. Her sacrality has been mobilized by upper-caste power to solidify Hindu beliefs. The cow may not be eaten as beef but is nonetheless exploited through the dairy industry. Bovine motherhood is simultaneously mobilized and capitalized for dairy protection and also weaponized against minorities such as Muslims and Dalits.

This is the core of feminism—the "empty" celebration of the feminine. The cow is sacred, yet not the bull or the buffalo. Hindu nationalists celebrate, indeed deify, the feminine—Mother Cow, Mother Nature, Mother Earth, Mother India. Yet rape statistics of women in India are sobering, cows wander the streets hungry and ignored, and economic policies privatize and ravage land to extract resources. Natrajan successfully and rightly highlights the centrality of the cow in the potent politics of contemporary Hindu nationalism.

Reply

The commentators for this essay raise several important points that widen, deepen, and complicate its argument. I am thankful to each of them for their close engagement and critical insights.

Before I respond, I wish to highlight the theoretical-political stakes involved. Theory is never distant from politics, since our explanations bring to light (or send to the shadows) particular forces in society. This essay (originally titled "Is There a Sacred Cow Belief?") advances a view that the so-called sacred cow belief (SCB) is a driver for violence in the name of the cow. The power of the SCB derives from its status as a "sacred" belief of a purportedly large population, "Hindus." Vigilantes are empowered to act in the name of the cow and "Hindus" simultaneously. The sacrality of the SCB, thus reified, places it beyond ordinary questioning. The essay then counters this reification by showing how the SCB is in fact a political construction that makes the cow the "site of the struggles for monopoly of the power to consecrate." It first argues that the cow is a "summarizing" rather than "elaborating" symbol in that it catalyzes feelings and seeks "commitment" for political actions rather than organizes moral lives. The essay then argues that the SCB is also not what it is made to be—an intuitive belief (i.e., a belief about a "fact" that the cow is sacred). The SCB is instead a reflective belief (i.e., a metarepresentation or a representation of a representation of the cow as sacred). It always requires validation through external context (e.g., authoritative sources) rather than being an established "fact." The SCB is thus an elaborate political construction that has acquired the fixity of a "fact," especially in times of Hindutva. That is, its existence, far being a timeless natural, is an example of one or more of the kinds of social constructions scholars have identified (see Haslanger 1995).

While its existence is doubtful in scholarship, the SCB is nonetheless the basis for a kind of human action (violence) in Indian society. It is therefore not enough for scholars to show that something is politically constructed (and hence invalidated in its existence). We also need to account for why people continue to be motivated to act by such entities as the SCB. In this sense, the SCB is analogous to "caste" itself. Caste is a social construction. Viewing caste simply as social group confers on caste an unnecessary ontological existence. Caste requires much more imagination than the lineage that it gets extrapolated from. There needs to be much more symbolic and material work to make "caste" from a social category into a mobilized group. It is a claim to being real. Yet "caste" has real consequences in terms of mobilizing actions in its name. Additionally, Hindutva operates through a twin lens of caste and its close cousin, "race," such that Dalits and Muslims are constructed as major threats to the Hindutva project of Hindu Rashtra and hence its main targets of violence (Natrajan 2022). Not surprisingly, with some unintended exceptions, all victims and targets of cow vigilantism happen to be Muslim or Dalit. All this is to say that a focus on the unraveling of the SCB has its uses for a liberatory politics in today's India. A theoretical dismantling of the SCB may have reverberations for the annihilation of caste.

The political stake is not only about "reality" but also about scholarship. My responses below are intended as further invitations to critical discussion about the character of our explanations rather than to underscore dogmatic positions. We have had long-running debates in the social sciences about structural versus individualist explanations, explanations versus understandings, the nature and utility of the concept of "culture" itself, or whether we need explanations at all since social science is about interpretation. To be able to generate a discussion that is critical implies the need to bring together a wide range of concepts—not necessarily ones that have been in conversation with each other to bear on (an agreed on) problem. The problem of cow vigilantism offers itself as one such domain for discussion.

I now turn to the commentators and my responses. Chaturvedi finds the focus on belief necessary but not sufficient, since "stigma, stench, reprehension, and disgust are part of the affective politics that perpetuates the SCB and its violence." Hence, she argues for supplementing the unmasking of the SCB with an unmasking of the reification of "disgust." On the other hand, on the basis of his own remarkable work on caste as an affective phenomenon, Lee offers disgust as an alternative to a focus on belief. Thus, for Lee, "when Hindu supremacist mobilizations are underway, appeals to 'belief' regarding cows, when made at all, are thoroughly eclipsed by elicitations of disgust (*ghṛṇā*) and hatred (*nafrat*) toward those who allegedly kill or eat them."

Affects such as disgust do aid and enhance explanations of cow vigilantism. The question is, Can affects such as disgust proceed without recourse to beliefs such as the SCB? Here we see divisions in scholarship. While phenomenologists argue that disgust is "directly founded on perception and does not entail acts of believing or judging" (Heinämaa 2020), the dominant view from social psychology is that disgust is animated through a magical belief in contamination or virality of the object of disgust (Rozin and Fallon 1987). This latter view has been further developed through a growing body of scholarship on psychopathology (McKay and Olatunji 2009) and moral psychology of disgust (Strohminger and Kumar 2018) that resolutely holds that disgust (as well as other affects such as contempt and fear) together with cognitive elements, such as beliefs, appraisals, or interpretations of situations. Disgust, it turns out, is a multidimensional construct that exists alongside and interwoven with ideas and beliefs about the world.

The politics of beef and cow vigilantism may instantiate Rozin's insistence that disgust is based on a magical belief in the viral properties of the object of disgust. Actors may indeed be motivated by disgust (*ghrnā*) but not without deep links to notions of and values about purity, pollution, and dirt and hence fears of "contamination," which also underscore and bring into play other values (contempt) and affects (fear) that shore up disgust. Stigmatized populations appear disgusting and polluting. Already deeply stigmatized as presumed "beef eaters" by vigilantes, Muslims and Dalits are profane "objects" who obey the law of contagion that animates the sympathetic magical belief of the SCB. It makes them embody a state of essential contamination. *Gaurakshaks* highlight two conflations at play. Their object of disgust varies between beef

and Muslim and Dalit bodies—positing a range of natural (ized) histories. Additionally, the cow and by extension the SCB combine the sacred (vs. profane) and the pure (vs. impure)—two spheres that have been argued by some to be distinct. This is its power.

Furthermore, the fact that political forces rationalize the violence not only by naturalizing disgust but also through continual public references and citations in law of the so-called SCB and a purported "Hindu" population makes it necessary to hold the SCB and disgust together. A theoretical mix of belief, affect, value, and ritual—something captured by Scott Atran's (2016) concept of "devoted actors"—helps explain cow vigilantism. To Lee's suggestion above, I submit that the claim to a SCB very much forms the conditions for mobilization (of a group, *gaurakshaks*), whereas disgust may be emphasized during the thick or din of violence ("when mobilizations are underway"). Put differently, the SCB acts as a group-formation mechanism, while disgust acts as a group-activation mechanism. Both naturalize violence, both are reified. Both belief and disgust make "difference" salient in inscribing situations as antagonistic, an enabling step toward violence.

Interestingly, disgust poses a challenge to social constructivists, since scholarship from epidemiology has made a strong case for viewing disgust as an evolutionary and adaptive trait—a claim that aids the reification of disgust. For instance, Valerie Curtis (2007), who was a hygiene and sanitation scientist, argues that "whilst the specifics of what we find disgusting are, of course, shaped by experience and culture, there is an overall biological pattern to our revulsions" (660) and "it would be wrong to think of disgust as being entirely a cultural construction" (663). My current work on toilets has alerted me to the ways Curtis's intellectual legacy as advisor for the Clean India Mission project of the first Hindutva government of 2014–2019 helped rationalize and naturalize the disgust of feces as a primordial trait of humans. The irony is that government agencies during this period went around villages to inculcate *ghṛṇā* toward feces among villagers who did open defecation.

The comments by Majumder allow me to bring in another aspect about cow vigilantism. Majumder notes, "I am most interested, though, in the anthropological conviction to which Natrajan also in part concedes, that there is a collective mind—which is a collective cognitive apparatus." Bringing in the work of ideology, Majumder rightly cautions about the danger in assuming a "collective cognitive apparatus that evenly perceives reality."

I am very sympathetic to Majumder's cautionary notes. There are two different points here: one on collective action and the other on the work done by ideology. To take the first, cow vigilantism is a form of collective action. It is rarely an individual who violates in the name of the cow. The question therefore is about how we think of collective action—for it is here that questions of "groupness" and categories denoting groups come into play. Here, it would be hard to point to any part of the essay where I have conceded to the existence of a "collective 'Hindu' mind" (let us call it CHM). The scare quotes around "Hindu" used in the essay are a standard indicator of a view that notes the constructed, unstable, nonhomogenous, nonunitary, and inherently historical nature of this category and the fact that categories are not groups. Cow vigilantes act as if there is such an identity as "Hindu" and an entity as a CHM. Indeed, this phenomenon is much more widespread and not restricted to *gaurakshaks*. It is about fictions that acquire the fixity of facts. Critiquing the "fact" of the SCB is necessary to show how *gaurakshaks* bring into existence a "we" that acts and in turn evokes a CHM as a collective site for the purported existence of the SCB. It follows then that unraveling the SCB is surely a questioning of the existence of CHM.

Here, the notion of ideology is important, as Majumder attests but not quite as she presents. By invoking a reified idea of the SCB and CHM, cow vigilantes mask their own work of cultural production. Tweaking Bourdieu (1985:727), it is about "the work whereby they [actors] manage to produce, if not the mobilized [group], then belief in the existence of the [group], which is the basis of the authority of its spokesmen." Cow vigilantes thus produce through their actions or "practice" a binding of actors, a feeling of belonging with each other that in fact "organizes practical action" (Brubaker 2003). As many anthropologists and psychologists have shown, such binding occurs through rituals. Thus, it is not ideology alone that "holds together a stable version of the world" (per Majumder) but ideology working in untidy ways with the everyday production of meanings (i.e., culture), formation of groups, "schemas," experiences, and durable dispositions (or habitus). Debates on culture today do admit explanatory space for representations in a person's mind while viewing the boundary between personal and public representations as porous (see Leschziner and Brett 2021; Strauss and Quinn 1998).

Menon's comments allow me to underscore the importance of cow vigilantism to the Hindutva project. Menon correctly notes that cow vigilante violence is far from evenly distributed all over India and suggests that "in the case of cow protection, it is less the cow that is the issue than the promotion of an aggressive Hinduism that is still in search of unifying issues in a society divided by caste." He then dismisses the focus on the SCB and calls instead for a "material and conjunctural" analysis of the violence. Yet, arguably, the cow has very much been a most fecund "unifying issue" for Hindutva, as witnessed by the normalization of the cow vigilante violence and the host of actions the cow has generated for collectives and institutions linked to Hindutva. Hindutva's power to command cultural conformity is also tied to the cow, as seen in the fact that Muslims and Dalits who live in states in India where Hindutva is strong tend to consume significantly less meat in general and less beef in particular than Muslims and Dalits in other states (Natrajan and Jacob 2018). Attending to how the symbolism of the cow materializes is very much part of a material and conjunctural analysis of Hindutva, one that enriches conventional political-economic analysis, which has very little to say about why collectives form and act.

There are multiple ways to resist the hegemony of the cow and the SCB. Here, Arumugam's highlighting of counter-imaginaries is salutary. She suggests a focus on the salience of the water buffalo instead of the cow to resignify what matters to the majority in India—Dalit Bahujans. Elsewhere, I have shown that the extent of beef eating (which includes buffalo meat) in India is nearly double what is officially claimed, and these are clearly underestimations (Natrajan and Jacob 2018). Such facts are a way of undercutting the status of the cow in India even while recognizing its power. Attending to the ways that the SCB motivates vigilantism does not in any way preclude attention to the buffalo and its importance, which is at variance with the hegemonic discourse of the glorification of the cow. Here, Doron's highlighting of Hindutva actors too reveals schisms in its power. As they note, the cow is a site of contradictions—being officially constructed as a hypervisible and venerable symbol while also being made invisible, subject to multiple forms of cruelty, power, and deep exploitation and a catalyst for Hindutva's casteist patriarchal and communal politics (as ably documented by Narayanan 2023). This only underscores the political character of the SCB—a key objective of my paper, as Doron acknowledges. Finally, the comments by Subramaniam bring out a larger political challenge—Hindutva's weaponization of what she has called "archaic modernity." How does one combat the scientific pretensions of what is clearly nonscience? The problem of the SCB and bovine politics in India plays out on this much larger canvas. Such a challenge is not unlike the discussion above on combating the power of illusory entities that motivate action. Both require us to look at discursive claims within the context of how they enable power and domination.

Cow vigilantism continues in India today. The conditions for making the cow sacred and inviolable in India have gathered pace with further stringent legislations being put into place to purportedly protect the cow at the expense of the rights of farmers, traders, and consumers and a continuing political rhetoric that glorifies the lynching of those suspected of killing a cow. Consequently, the problem of the "sacred cow" as a representation that motivates and mobilizes violence in Indian society is also about its durability.

—Balmurli Natrajan

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