



# The Myth of the Holy Cow

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Hugely controversial upon its publication in India, this book has already been banned by the Hyderabad Civil Court and the author's life has been threatened. Jha argues against the historical sanctity of the cow in India, in an illuminating response to the prevailing attitudes about beef that have been fiercely supported by the current Hindu right-wing government and the fundamentalist groups backing it.

## The Myth of the Holy Cow Details

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# From Reader Review *The Myth of the Holy Cow* for online ebook

## **Johnny Cordova says**

It's an important and well-researched book presenting undeniable evidence that beef was a major part of the Indian diet through most of her history. It neglects, however, addressing the factors behind Hinduism's sudden veneration of the cow and gradual transition to complete vegetarianism. I'm giving it three stars only for begging a compelling question and failing to answer.

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## **Navaneeth Vengallur says**

A factual account of the history of meat (esp. beef) eating in India. Unbelievably true. How the Vedic brahmins had the 'privilege' getting to eat beef every day, how the issue is politicised and much more.

Must read for beef-haters and religious fundamentalists. All the more relevant now since MP govt banned and Karnataka govt plans to ban beef eating itself (earlier only cow slaughter was banned).

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## **?r? says**

Jha has clearly done his homework in writing the book. The extensive footnotes and bibliography are evidence for that. The controversy surrounding the publication is quite unfortunate, because if the people who protested it and threatened the author's life had actually read the book, they'd have had to admit that the claim Jha makes (that the cow has not always had a 'holy' status in Indian religious traditions and was at one point routinely killed and eaten) is neither outlandish nor baseless. The sources cited are impeccable primary and secondary material -- they range from the Vedic sources to the Dharmasastras and commentaries thereof -- and the most credible founts of information on the subject.

The scope of the argument is short, so there's not much speculation in the book on why the cow may have become 'holy' in what became Hinduism. This is a much larger question and deserves a deeper treatment than Jha's perfunctory allusion that changing socio-economic conditions may have led to the re-classification of the cow as an inedible animal, and indeed as an object of veneration if not worship. Hopefully, Jha will take up the question elsewhere if he has not already.

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## **John Eliade says**

Religious fundamentalism relies on the assumption that the passage of time is incidental and that modern worshippers are no different from their forbears, with an obvious bias to the interpretation of the modern. A brief study of history immediately (ideally) tears up this thesis as the novice historian comes to realize that the past was not like the present and the mindset and foundations with which our ancestors and predecessors built their lives is as incomprehensible to us as those of an undiscovered country.

As someone who was raised as a fundamentalist Christian, this was my path out: a healthy stream of

historical research and broad perspectives slowly dismantled the fortress of logical fallacies propped up by cherry-picked Bible verses.

(Wait, wasn't this supposed to be a book review?)

When I first announced my intention to travel to the Himalayas and through India, my grandmother's initial reaction was, "You need to be careful. The Indians, they worship cows. And if you're driving a car and you hit a cow, they will attack the driver." Despite the fact that my trip to India never panned out (as of this writing) this sentiment, tucked away in the back of my head as a kernel of truth in a wider picture I didn't yet understand, stayed with me.

At my university library in Hamburg, this book, with a hot pink spine, back, and cow on the front cover, leapt out at me. Reading the title and the quote from the Observer,

Not since Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*... has a book caused such a violent reaction.

I was sold.

Now, the content of the book is fairly simple. Jha outlines the history of the Indo-Aryan relationship with cattle from the Aryan Migration to the Present Day. He quotes Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina sources with great skill and writes in a way that is dense with information but compact and light for the uninitiated. I - a non-Indologist - found this book suspiciously easy to read, but when I was able to look at the endnotes of each chapter, felt comforted at the breadth and depth of Jha's research and knowledge.

This passage:

At one place Indra states, "they cook for me fifteen plus twenty oxen".(14) At other places he is said to have eaten the flesh of bulls,(15) of one (16) or of a hundred buffaloes(17) or 300 buffaloes roasted by Agni (18) or a thousand buffaloes.(19) Second in importance to Indra is Agni to whom there are some 200 hymns in the Rgveda.(20) (29)

is notable for the amount of time it cites scripture in the space of three sentences (6) but is by no means extraordinary in the terms of the book.

Jha is a particularly gifted historian: he is not only able to readily cite his sources and seemingly at will (the generally easy part) but can deliver them in a cohesive and generally light narrative. On a difficult topic, no less.

To summarize the history of the sacred cow: the Aryan tribes were nomads who measured wealth in cows and other livestock. They brought their mythology and rituals - including animal sacrifice - with them to the Indian subcontinent, where a host of Vedic literature exists full of references not only to ritual animal slaughter but to regular meat consumption. All the characters of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Jha notes, further explaining the most incriminating parts of the stories, are meat eaters, and do so without shame.

Only with the composition of the Upanishads, and later with the advent of Buddhism and Jainism do we see a shift. The doctrine of ahimsa (nonviolence) is introduced and ritual animal sacrifice is more or less banned by the Buddha and Mahavira. However, strict vegetarianism is still not prescribed at those times. It is recorded that the Buddha died from eating bad pork, while it was not unheard of that Mahavira accepted chicken meat as alms. Neither the Buddhists, Jains, or Upanishads would sign the death knell for cattle sacrifice and beef-eating in general.

The earliest date that Jha can apparently ascribe to that is 883. Around this time, Dharmashastric authors began writing extensively about the kaliyuga, the era of decline, and within a millenium, would ultimately prescribe fifty new laws of purity for Indians to reduce the age of corruption. One of these, was to ban cow slaughter. The year 883 is the date of the earliest cow sanctuary that has been identified in India, a feature of Hindu temples that would pop up all over the subcontinent in succeeding centuries. From then on, the Brahmanical class, obsessed with ritual purity and preserving the clarity and goodness of the age sought to stamp out as much heterodoxy regarding this issue continuing into the present day.

But... why? Jha doesn't explicitly answer this and seems to go out of his way to not answer the question. Religious fundamentalists view their religion as ideally unchanged (and at most corrupted) but that doesn't mean historians have to then avoid a cause and effect understanding. What Jha did was essentially lay out a road map of the textual history regarding the relationship between Indians and their cows.

The answer, I suppose, will have to wait until another time. For Jha. The year 883, I think, gives us a good, clear indication for what changed: the Gupta Empire (responsible for India's Golden Age) fell, and the first waves of Muslim Conquerors were threatening the political makeup of the subcontinent. To even the learned, especially to those with a cyclical understanding of time (i.e. the kaliyuga) it certainly seemed like the world was going through a crisis, and emergency ritual measures needed to take place. As the centuries wore on, the Islamic Invaders became more pronounced, and more powerful. Though they never succeeding in their ultimate goal of converting all of India, they certainly established deep roots on the subcontinent, with a dark memory stained on the cultural psyche of the Hindus.

Not once does Jha mention the word "Muslim" or "Islam," and whether it was a strategic or smart decision, remains to be said. Even the way I wrote it above might come over as finger pointing, but is not intended to be. The Islamic conflict with the Indians produced an othering effect. Muslims shied away from pork but indulged in beef, among Hindus, the exact opposite. What was an innocuous difference borne of the ahimsa doctrine now became a mark of identity, a token to wear around one's neck to identify one's tribe from the other.

Jha doesn't call out the role Islam and hallal played in the sacralizing of the Indian cow. But he does hint at them with his last line, calling out the Hindu identity movement, Hindutva:

But the holiness of the cow is elusive. For there has never been a cow-goddess, nor any temple in her honour. Nevertheless the veneration of this animal has come to be viewed as a characteristic trait of modern day non-existent monolithic "Hinduism" bandied about by the Hindutva forces. (146)

As it was pointed out by the novelist Pankaj Mishra in his own review,

Jha did not set out to provoke. His main thesis - that beef-eating was not unknown to Indians of the pre-Muslim period - is neither new nor startling.

Yet, the Hyderabad Civil Court set out to ban it, and a self-described "Defender of the Faith" took a page out of the Muslims' book and declared a fatwa against Jha. Why? Because Jha pointed out what was already apparent and written down in Hinduism's own sacred texts?

No. Because at the core of it, identity built on intentional misunderstanding is fragile, and Jha held up a mirror to a particularly holey theory of belief.

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## **Dharini B says**

3.5

The book does not live up to the potential offered by its captivating title. "The Myth of the Holy Cow" has no dearth of references and examples of animal sacrifice and non-vegetarianism from various holy books and legal scriptures of Hinduism. As I am unfamiliar with most of these referenced texts, I cannot vouch for the objectivity/lack of internal bias.

Where it fails terribly is in its structure. The first few chapters are bound to overwhelm lay readers with its scrambled excess of examples. The main argument this book puts forth is the claim for supremacy by Hindus over Buddhists in the society. Jha proposes that the concept of ahimsa (non-violence) towards all living entities preached by the Buddhists was gaining popularity, and they strongly condemned the pointless sacrifices by the Hindus, even when they allowed consumption of meat in practice. This in turn forced Hindus, especially Brahmins, to give up meat altogether and adopt vegetarianism for Hinduism to regain foothold as a revered religion. This argument, however interesting, is not central to the book as it should have been, and is only dealt with in the last few pages in a cursory fashion. Also, it fails to answer with certainty why and when the cow was anointed holy.

But do read it, for it presents intriguing examples and anecdotes of animal sacrifices and non-vegetarianism prevalent in the Vedic times, the central tenets of Buddhism and Jainism dealing with animals and treatment of animals, and of course, the ever contradictory injunctions in most (or all. Probably all) holy texts.

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## **Bipin Singh says**

Jha produces copious evidences from texts ranging from the Vedas to the Buddhist and Jaina canonical texts to make his point. He also quotes from the epics, Puranas and Manusmriti to establish that beef was a part of dietary preference of lay folk as well as the priestly class. The works of Charak and Sushruta, renowned medics of ancient India, also prescribe beef to patients for its medicinal properties. The evidence is compelling and more than dispels the notion of sacredness of cow in ancient brahmanism. The piece written by Dr. Ambedkar also sheds light on the issue and the context in which in all these developments took place.

The reasoning forwarded by Jha is based on solid research and helps in better understanding of our past. The text is remarkable for its simple language and effective communication of the idea.

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### **Sirigiri Vipin says**

Let's give the credit where it deserves. The book is an overwhelming encyclopedic compilation of various cow mentions in the Hindu, Buddhist/Jain texts and scriptures- right from its treatment, usage for sacrificial or other purposes, comparison with other animals, Mahaveera or Gautama's alleged comments or treatment of cow, to its downright butchering technique.

But where the book terribly fails is when it tries to judge dietary preferences of Hindus by only these texts. It runs on the popular eurocentric idea that Hindus started as Aryans invading India on their horses, butchering and sacrificing people and animals at the drop of a hat. It completely ignores the vast spiritual texts in Hinduism and doesn't even attempt to connect its translated version of cow practices to some kind of logic or possible alternate translation.

Continuing with the eurocentric idea, it goes on to prove that only until Buddhism and Jainism came along, did Hindus started treating their cow as holy. It is naive to expect that Hindus loved their cow since eternity or could've never butchered or have eaten it but it is also equally naive to satirize a particular religion considering few of its texts in silos. If that was the case, imagine people of the 30th century having a worldwide view about the present world based on our beef cookbooks. Wow, we would look some nasty beef butchers, wouldn't we?

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### **Balaji says**

Clear references to he current scenario. It clearly explains the fact that Jains, Brahmins, Buddhists ate beef. Lots of historical incidents covered including Ramayana and Mahabharata. Ma must read to know the truth.

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### **Saji Maruthurkkara says**

Quiet an eye opener.

Hard to read as it reads like a phd thesis / research article rather than a book!! Go to last chapter to get a summary of the whole thesis.

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### **Dinesh Murthy says**

An eye opener!!!

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## **Pradheep says**

Yes, The book is called "The Myth of holy cow", and 200 odd pages of the book bear testimony to it. It is written like a thesis. Motivation for reading this book will be, to find answers rather than for pleasure.

Quote from the book : "Atho annam via gauh" - Taittiriya Brahmana

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## **Arhan Deshmukh says**

The author of this ridiculous book is politically influenced by **Marxist** ideologues and hence, uses the cheap method of deliberately twisting, misquoting and mistranslating the verses of **each and every** text mentioned. Be it the Vedas, or the Arthashastra, etc. Such irresponsible work may lead to breaking one's own image in the field of study.

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## **Lizw says**

This book is banned as blasphemous in India; it argues that the sanctity of the cow in Hinduism is a relatively late development dating back no further than the end of the first millennium CE, well after Hinduism's sacred texts were committed to writing, and cites examples of cows being sacrificed well into the twentieth century. It's well-referenced and on the whole convincing to this non-expert (I took the equivalent of one undergraduate module on Hinduism). The main weakness, so far as I could detect, is that Jha does not always clearly distinguish between buffalo and cows, which some other authors think were historically treated differently in Hinduism for complex reasons to do with caste and race.

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## **Abhishek says**

insightful and backed by reasons.

on a topic as sensitive as this, every statement is backed by logic.

an academic effort, though against the cult, one may agree to it or not, its a must read!

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## **Thanigai Adhavan says**

If only the layman of everyday understood and accepted such strong evidence as proof of his/her collective past, the contemporary newspapers would carry news that is hopeful rather than alarming.

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