SOPHIA
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-018-0647-8

Animal ethics and Hinduism's milking, mothering legends: analysing Krishna the butter thief and the Ocean of Milk

Yamini Narayanan [1]

Abstract The Hindu ethic of cow protectionism is legislatively interpreted in many Indian states through the criminalisation of cow slaughter, and beef consumption, obscuring dairying's direct role in the butchery of spent female and unproductive male bovines. Cow milk, however, is celebrated as sacred in scriptural and ritual Hinduism, and mobilised by commercial dairying, as well as by right-wing Hindu groups to advance the idea of a Hindu Indian nation. In order to fully protect cows from the harms of human exploitation, it is vital to problematise *milk* as a benign, rightful product for humans to consume, including its use in Hindu beliefs, rituals and identity. The paper applies feminist vegan critiques to two Hindu legends commonly invoked to promote milk consumption: the boy-god Krishna's great love for butter and the mythology of the gods and demons churning the Ocean of Milk to attain ambrosia. These critiques unsettle the core relationship of the Hindu to the cow as a lactating mother and provoke the idea that the original sacred milk in Hinduism in fact is plant-based and vegan.

Keywords Cow protection · Hinduism · Dairy · Krishna · Mother cow · Motherhood · India · Feminist · Vegan · Milk

Introduction

This paper argues that in order to interpret the Hindu ethic of cow protectionism in ways that actively protect the cow from the harms of human exploitation, it is vital to problematise the significance and use of cow milk in Hindu beliefs, rituals and identity. Politically and legislatively, cow protection reforms in most Indian states include the criminalising of cow slaughter, as well as beef consumption purportedly because of its

✉ Yamini Narayanan
y.narayanan@deakin.edu.au

[1] Deakin University, Burwood Highway, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia

Published online: 05 April 2018

obvious link to slaughter. However such mandates essentially protect and advance right-wing Hindutva extremist-nationalist ideas of an upper-caste *Hindu* Indian nation through the violent marginalisation of Muslims and 'low-caste' Hindus, the ostensible killers of cows (Naqvi 2014; Chigateri 2008). Crucially, they obscure dairy's direct role in cow slaughter, especially in India. India rears no bovines for beef production; it is the unproductive *dairying* animals that constitute the beef industry (Joshipura 2015).

However, Hindu notions of cow milk's sacrality—much like animal agriculture, especially dairying (Gillespie 2018/forthcoming)—has insidiously woven itself into the fabric of daily commercial and cultural life in India. Hindu beliefs and rituals regard cow milk as central to birthing, purifying and sustaining the Universal order itself. Almost no Hindu ritual is conducted without the use of milk, ghee and butter (Singh 2007). Patriarchal interpretations of Hindu scriptures, beliefs and rituals are instrumentalised by both commercial and religious purveyors of dairying to advance the widespread consumption of cow milk and associated products like ghee and butter.

This paper applies feminist vegan critiques to Hindu theological and ritual narratives that legitimise and even glorify human consumption of cow milk as critical counters to the patriarchal interpretations which commodify bovine motherhood and bovine infant lactation. Akin to the aims of applied anthropology that aims to move the discipline beyond ethnography to practical field practices, Korom (2000) recommends an 'applied theology', or 'a theology that is aimed at solving problems' caused by some of India's most pressing social and environmental issues. Feminist vegan critiques challenge the singular emphasis on meat alone as responsible for violence to animals, including their slaughter, and explicitly highlight milk and eggs as also profuse with harms (Gillespie 2018/forthcoming; Cusack 2013; Adams 2010). Carol Adams (2010: 305) frames milk and eggs as 'feminized protein', whose production requires the 'sexual slavery' of cows and chickens, and writes, 'Even though the animals are alive, dairy products and eggs are not victimless foods.' When applied to Hindu theology, vegan feminist critiques of Hinduism's milking and mothering legends suggest the fetishisation of 'motherhood', and human consumption of cow milk as gendered, reproductive and sexualised exploitation. These analyses destabilise ideas of the human-cow relation as one enacted in harmony and reciprocal care, and suggest that there is historical and contemporaneous complicity of silence on the ethical problematics of commodifying animal lactation.

This paper applies feminist vegan critiques to two of the most popular Hindu legends that are used to justify the consumption of cow milk by Hindus. One, stories of the beloved boy-god Krishna and his great love of butter churned from cow milk are used by commercial dairying to promote the sale of cow milk, and by Hindutva narratives to construct the idea of a prosperous Hindu nation that is overflowing with milk (Valenze 2011). However these legends ignore—akin to the fate of male calves in dairy production—the story of Krishna's own separation from his biological mother immediately after birth in jail, even prior to receiving his first lactation from her. In contrast to the celebrations of his lactation-based relationship with his adoptive mothers (human and cows), the fate of Krishna's biological mother, or any reasonable assumption as regards her anxiety at the separation, or grief over her unconsumed lactation go unremarked. This is reminiscent of the complicity of silence around the harms to dairy cows, whose lactation (and biological children) are directed to serve their 'adopted' human progeny. The 'adoptive' cow-mother-to-'human child' relationship is celebrated whereas the biological cow-mother-to-calf relationship is denied.

Two, the core feature of the great legend of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, one of the most powerful Hindu mythologies on the sacrality of milk, has been almost entirely invisibilised. The scriptures describe the churning of the oceans by the gods and demons to compete for ambrosia or the nectar of immortality. The increasingly refined, milky waters of the ocean are achieved by the mixing of water and *medicinal herbs and plants*, allowing a powerful provocation that the holiest of milks in Hinduism are in fact *plant-based* and *vegan*.

The paper first provides an overview of the instrumentalisation of bovine motherhood and lactation in the narratives and practices of both ritual Hinduism and commercial dairying in India. These sacral and secular discourses reinforce each other to construct the mythology of a cow-revering Hindu civilisation, obscuring the gendered harms to inherent dairying animals. This section provides an instructive context to the second half of the paper, which examines two of the most significant milking and mothering legends in scriptural and ritual Hinduism.

Milk and Motherhood in Hinduism

In the Bhagvad Gita, one of the central texts of Hinduism, Lord Krishna equates the cow to the entirety of the Universe itself. Korom (2000) writes, 'One thing that we can discern from the portrayal of the cow during [the early Vedic] period is that she was identified with the totality of the universe.' Since the early Vedic times (1500 BCE), the lactating, fecund, mothering cow and her generous outpouring of milk symbolise fertility and material abundance. Cow milk is not sacred in and of itself as its natural biological function to serve as infant lactation for the calf. Catherine Albanese (1990) distinguishes between nature as sacred and nature as sacred *resource*; in the latter case, the commodification of nature involves domination of nature.

The cow's milk attains significance in Hindu thought well beyond its role in providing nourishment to her infant; its greatest consequence in fact is its capacity to provide material and spiritual nourishment to humans. Srivastava's analysis (1979) of *Rigveda* 1.164.9, *Atharvaveda* 9.9.9, 4.39.2 and *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4, 5.8.10 notes the extent of cow's veneration as a *lactating* mother is clear from the ways in which her udder is objectified: 'That the great Cow may, with exhaustless udder, pouring a thousand streams, give milk to feed us' (726). The cow's udder is 'pure' (231) and 'heavenly' (605), and it swells with 'lordly nectar' (223), and the cow's milk is 'nutritious, brightly shining, all-sustaining' (234). Indeed, even the bull is milked 'gleaming (milk/semen) from his udder' (Rigveda IV.3, in Jamison and Brereton 2014: 562). Cow milk and milk products permeate every ritual practice in Hinduism. Anna S. King notes (2012: 182), 'Dairy products are extensively used in Hindu culture, and the five products (*panchagavya*) of the cow—milk, ghee, butter, urine, and dung—are all used in *puja* (worship) as well as in life crisis ritual and penance.' The *panchagavya* are endowed with cleansing properties and are used for ritual purification and offerings to deities (Simoons 1974: 21). Indeed, Rana P.B. Singh (2007: 218) goes so far as to state that 'Without milk no sacrifice or any ritual offering in Hinduism [can] be completed…'.

Contemporaneously, the pancamrta (five nectars), a mixture of milk, curds, ghee, sugar and honey, is believed to be derived from the pancagavya (the five products derived from the cow—milk, ghee, butter, urine and dung). The pancamrta is used to

ritually bathe the idols in Hindu temples (Jha 2002), or 'bathe the statues of deities' more generally (Mahias 1988: 265). Since the post-Vedic period, the belief in the purificatory properties of the *panchagavya* has become even stronger (Jha 2002: 29). Jessica Frazier writes in the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* that the Agnihotra or the sacrifices to the fire-god is contemporaneously one of the most widely practiced rituals in Hinduism:

> Today it is perhaps the Vedic ritual with the most pervasive place in everyday Hindu religious life. It is a daily rite in which oblations to the gods are offered in the ritually established household fires, at dawn and dusk of each day. Into these fires libations largely consisting of milk and water are offered... (Frazier 2008: 17)

The use of calf lactation for these purposes is both a human right and a bovine duty. The instrumentalisation of motherhood follows a Hindu patriarchal line of reasoning whereby female Hindu bodies—women or bovine—are burdened as *mothers* to preserve an upper-caste Hindu cultural and religious purity (Dhruvrajan 1990). In his analysis of Hindu motherhood as 'patriotic motherhood', Thomas Blom Hansen (1994: 87) argues that Hindu patriarchy regards 'women and first and foremost mothers', and to serve the children and her husband is the 'supreme duty of any woman.' Motherhood is indeed 'a patriotic duty' as it is the women who uphold Hindu values and culture, and are passing them on to the children.

In a similar vein, Hindu patriarchal conceptions of women—and cows—as mothers are used to exploit bovines for their reproductive capacities. Pankaj Jain (2014) conceptualises the term 'bovine dharma' to describe what he regards as the 'inherent qualities' of the cow that are designed to be useful for human exploitation. Sacrificing herself and her bovine child thus for humans is indeed the cow's dharma or her duty. Jain carefully curates the material uses of each part of the cow's body and then proceeds to assert that cows in India are valued as mothers, not materials, thereby entirely unselfconsciously reinforcing Hindu patriarchy by conflating maternal and material exploitation:

> The cow gives all of her belongings to humans: milk and other dairy products strengthen us, bullocks are utilized in farming, cow dung is utilized as a fertilizer, and urine is used as an Ayurvedic medicine. After her death, the cow's bones are utilized in the sugar industry, her skin is used in the leather industry, and her horns are used to make combs…humans should be eternally grateful to cows and Indians do not just exploit cows for materialistic benefits but instead regard them as mothers. (Jain 2014: 170–171).

The voluntarily 'giving' cow is such a common depiction in scholarly analyses of Hinduism's milking and mothering legends so as to usually pass unremarked. Hawley describes butter as 'the climax of affection and veneration' of the cow in India. In his analysis of stories of Krishna stealing butter, Hawley argues that the butter churned from the cow's milk epitomises love:

> Butter is love, for it is the most concentrated form of the substance that flows forth uniquely from love: milk…The symbolism of butter is especially apt because the *giving and receiving of milk* [emphasis mine] does indeed lead to a concentration of experience. *The more one gives, the more one experiences a churning of the heart as the emotions intensify around the object of one's love* [emphasis added]. (Hawley 1983: 10)

Milk, however, is never voluntarily 'given' by cows to humans; it is consistently 'taken' by humans by removing the calf from his or her mother. The focus of the churning maternal heart of the bovine mother is her own calf, from whom she is typically separated immediately after birth (von Keyserlingk and Weary 2007). In an eight-part critique of 'ahimsa milk' farmed from cows owned by Krishna devotees, feminist vegan Linda McKenzie (2018) argues that the cow's maternal status is used to legimitise the exploitation of her reproductive capacity and does not alter her status as enslaved *property* even in the dairy farms of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness). Indeed, while the suffering of cows and calves in modern dairies is well documented (Gillespie 2018/forthcoming), the Rigveda too (1.164.9, in Jamison and Brereton 2014: 355) hints at the distress experienced by the animals at the disruption of the mother-child bond:

> The mother was harnessed to the yoke-pole of the sacrificial reward;
>
> her child stood up amid the penned cows.
>
> The calf bellowed and looked toward the cow of every color
>
> three wagon-treks (in the distance).

Hindu frameworks of milk, however, have permeated cultural and commercial institutions in India. Milk's significance in shaping the narratives of right-wing and secular politics in *making* contemporary India serves as a contrast to beef's supposed culpability in *un*making the Indian nation. The next section provides an overview of the extent to which Hindu mythologies of cow milk and commerce are intertwined in the commercialisation of dairy, and the making of the Indian, albeit, a *Hindu* Indian nation.

Mother Cow and the Making of a *Hindu* Mother India

Religion and commerce are almost indistinguishably intertwined in complex ways in Indian bovine husbandry for milk production. In his *Cow in India*, the acclaimed treatise on the economics of bovine breeding and farming, Dasgupta (1945: 13) goes so far as to say, 'Man and cow have become, by long association in India at least, a composite animal. One cannot do without the other.' The utility of the cow for milk and the bull for traction has extended to political institutions and narratives of nation-building such as 'Gandhian philosophical musings used to establish a newly independent India, or contemporary Hindu nationalist political posturing' (Wiley 2014: 111–112). *Gaushalas* or Hindu cow shelters for retired or sick bovines are vital spaces

for advancing these nationalisms via breeding for dairying, as well as framing cow protectionism as a communal issue (Lodrick 1981).

The Indian dairying sector was formalised and commercialised in the 1950s. It received its first political endorsement—one that would prove extremely powerful—in 1970, via Operation Flood, the National Dairy Development Board's watershed program. This initiative was driven by Verghese Kurien, who is heralded as the father of India's White Revolution. Operation Flood was pivotal in revolutionising milk as a commercial product and advancing India from a milk-deficient to a milk-surplus nation. Indeed, the imagery of an overflowing *flood* of milk hearkens to the great Hindu legend of the mythical flood of milk churned from the oceans by the gods, demi-gods and demons:

> Hindu visions of an ocean of milk proved to be prophetic of the last quarter of the twentieth century. During that time, Indians launched the most ambitious dairy development scheme in the history of the world, enabling India to become today's largest producer of milk. (Valenze 2011: 270)

Operation Flood eliminated India's reliance on the import of powdered milk from the West. This was perceived to be the removal of a major shackle of newly independent India from Western colonialism. Freedom via a protective mother was a crucial sentiment in the early decades of the nation's birth as free, self-governing country. Operation Flood celebrated Indian dairy by-products such as curds and ghee, which was pivotal in the nascent identity construction of the young nation. In the last four decades, dairy has been mobilised into playing an even greater role in nation-building, driven by commercial interests of the secular nation as well as Hindutva though these agenda can sometimes be at odds. Wiley (2014: 95) writes, 'milk is promoted to enhance growth and development in India – to solidify India's position among the world's growing "superpowers"'. However, while the National Dairy Development Board is 'seeking to maximize cow and buffalo milk production' for profit, an 'active anti-buffalo-milk consumption campaign in India has also emerged (Wiley 2014: 95), due to the perceived spiritual purity of the cow's milk, and impurity of buffalo milk (Narayanan 2018).

Dairy economics in India has always recognised the necessity of slaughtering unproductive dairying animals to sustain milk production. The ban on cow slaughter in India has been received with frustration by both Indian and non-Indian scholars who sought an 'efficient' approach to the problem of dealing with 'useless' cattle—bulls, bull calves, non-milking cows and all weak and/or diseased cattle. American cultural ecologist Marvin Harris (1966) adopted a cultural materialist position in his provocative essay *The Cultural Ecology of India's Cattle*. Harris famously argued (1966: 261) that the 'irrational, non-economic and exotic aspects of the Indian cattle complex are greatly overemphasised at the expense of rational, economic and mundane interpretations.' The ethic of non-violence or *ahimsa* that underpins Hindu resistance to cow slaughter was for Harris (261) 'in obedience to nonrational, or frankly irrational beliefs.' As early as the 1960s, Verghese Kurien also opposed a national ban on cow slaughter, declaring that if India's wanted cheap and plentiful milk, it had to slaughter *en masse* its spent cows and unproductive males.

The mathematics of the bovine milk economy remains as Kurien predicted. India today has the highest 'livestock' population in the world at 485 million, of which dairy bovines—including cows and buffalo—comprise 185.2 million (Chhabra et al. 2013), making it also the largest global owner of cattlehead (FAO 2015). In spite of a near countrywide ban on cow slaughter, cows are—necessarily—trafficked and slaughtered undercover in the thousands every day to sustain India's growing dairy sector (Chaudhery 2014; Chilkoti and Crabtree 2014). The government claims that the exported beef is sourced from buffalo; while there is no moral difference between a buffalo and a cow (and a goat and a chicken), evidence suggests that cow beef is also exported in substantial amounts. Chilkoti and Crabtree (2014) calculate the birth rate of the total estimated population of cows in India over a 5-year period between 1997 and 2002, based on a 15–18 monthly calving rate. They estimate that there is a shortfall of seven crores cattle head (70 million), which cannot be attributed to natural death, even allowing for an exaggerated infant mortality as high as 50%. They write of the recent beef exports:

> In 2010, for instance, India claimed to export 653,000 tonnes of buffalo. Curiously, global imports of the same meat came to just 169,000 tonnes. Much of the gap is assumed to be made up of contraband cow, cleverly disguised until it arrives on foreign shores.

However, commercial sale of milk continues to escalate each year, placing India as the world's leading producer of milk (USDA 2017). Significant Hindu mythological stories have been woven into the widespread commercialisation of milk and milk products, thus implicitly and explicitly reinforcing cow milk as a *Hindu* product. The association between the boy-god Krishna, who loved milk and butter, and commercial dairy products is a strong religio-cultural and commercial influence in modern India. Wiley (2014: 15) states that stories that 'Krishna… is well-known and beloved for his affection for cows, cow milk, and butter…contributes to milk's position as a divine substance.' Krishna's association with cows has influenced many contemporary Hindu rituals; Lodrick notes (2005: 72) notes, 'The identification of Krishna with the cow is further reinforced by the ceremonies and rituals that accompany many Krishna-related festivals celebrated throughout India today…' For example, the ceremony of 'the priests who feed milk to the idol of Krishna at certain times of day at Vaishnava temples' is believed to have developed out of these mythologies (Lodrick 2005: 79).

In September 1995, reports of statues of Hindu deities actually drinking the milk offered to them 'spread rapidly across the Hindu world' and led to skyrocketing milk sales (Wiley 2014: 157). In the northern cities of India, it is common in Krishna and Shiva temples to bathe idols in thousands of litres of milk every month as offerings (Sharma 2013). Further, the Krishna mythology is widely referenced in the sale of dairy products, and even a perfunctory.

Google image search shows that images of the young Krishna stealing butter are widely mobilised in dairy advertisements and logos. Dairies commonly bear the name of Krishna—Sri Krishna dairy, Sri Krishna ghee and the conglomerate Chennai-based chain Sri Krishna Sweets among a few. Indeed, even three decades ago, Hawley observed that images of Krishna as a child were used in dairy advertisements in India:

> This more youthful Krishna is famous as an adolescent lover surrounded by a myriad of adoring cowherd maidens (gopis), but perhaps even better known as the active, mischievous child the dairy ads celebrate. The import of the butter thief extends far beyond the dairy industry, of course: one meets him in almost every corner of Indian culture. He is a familiar presence in home and temple altars, appearing typically as a little bronze image two or three inches high, and he casts his spell beyond the realms of ritual that belong by rights to him. (Hawley 1983: 5)

The exaltation of cow lactation continues to be central to the nation-making narrative of Hindu India. In 2017, Mahiraj Dhwaj Singh, the Hindu co-convenor of the Muslim wing of the Hindu nationalist party RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), announced that their annual *iftar* feast for breaking the daily Ramadan fast would celebrate dairy products from the Indian cow to emphasise the message of 'save the cow' to the Muslims (First Post 2017). The irony of unselfconsciously advocating cow destruction to the very community that they frequently accused of cow slaughter went unremarked.

Seeking historical coherence to build a contemporary narrative of cow issues in India, and indeed, framing policy, is deeply problematic as these accounts are fragmented, and contradictory. As Morrison (2014: 59) writes, tales of 'the past that never was, a problematic and unenlightened era, or a golden age prior to the decay brought about by modernity [or] colonization...' are political. They are intertwined with advancing the power of groups invested with such narrations, at the cost of obscuring diversity and contradictions to such chronicling. 'Not only does the first part of that construction falsely reduce and homogenize diverse and dynamic histories, but the second part builds on the problematic logic of succession' (Morrison 2014: 59). Morrison (2014: 44) writes:

> Happy indigenes living in harmony with nature were rudely interrupted by colonial intervention which brought about deforestation, degradation, and a breakdown of traditional forms of management and self-governance...The 'Hindu Eden' of the timeless precolonial was followed by a loss of innocence and massive destruction of environment laid entirely at the feet of the foreign intruder. That such a vision biologizes social distinction and naturalizes power relations might go without saying; that it is simply false as a historical vision, must, however, be emphasized.

Selective mythologies that are regarded as foundational to cementing the meta-narrative of the cow as a giving mother are themselves problematic when read and interpreted in a wider context. Specific messages are selectively excavated and interpreted as the truth from religious scriptures to serve political and commercial ends (Adams 1993), without cognisance of the context in which they are embedded. Carol Adams (1993) for instance, regards the Genesis mandate to humans to 'Be fruitful, fill the earth, and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth' as responsible for justifying the property status of animals, and institution of animal factory farms; however, the Genesis passage in its

entirety invests humans with being ethical stewards of the planet (Murray 1992). The Hindu mythologies around the Mother Cow as nurturing and sustaining the universe is far from a straightforward account of a 'giving mother' willingly diverting her lactation from her infant calf for her 'human progeny'.

Hindus' Ambivalent Relationship with the Lactating Cow

Krishna's Love of Butter: the Unexplored Problematics of Mother-Child Separation

The love of the young Lord Krishna for butter and curds is so celebrated in Hinduism as to render the god himself indistinguishable from these dairy products. In a cow-focused edition of Hindu magazine *Kalyana Kalpataru*, Dewan Bahadur K. S. Ramaswami Sastri (1945: 67) notes that '…the names Gopala [one who protects the cows] and Govinda [one who brings satisfaction to the cows] were given to Sri Krsna and the cow and milk and butter became inseparably connected with Sri Krsna'. In *Krishna: The Butter Thief*, John Stratton Hawley (1983: 5) notes that the story of god Krishna, most beloved as an 'active, mischievous child' is situated amid 'an abundance of dairy products' (Wiley 2014: 121). The chubbiness of young Krishna '…is symbolic of his penchant for all things dairy – especially butter…' (Wiley 2014: 121–122).

As the child-god and dairy, the udders of the bovine mother and the breasts of the human mother are also conflated in the scriptures. The Bhagvada Purana celebrates the motherhood of women and cows, and the breastmilk of women and cows is regarded as auspicious for all the world (King 2012). Their breasts and udders are all overflowing with milk, from which the boy-god Krishna and the calves all freely drink. Krishna thus also becomes brother of the calves, and the male calves are also Krishna, as the calves and Krishna are collapsed as one. The flowing milk from breasts and udders is symbolic of the proliferation of motherly love in accounts of Krishna's life (King 2012: 183):

> In the *Bhāgavata Purāna* cow and human mothers symbolize the fertility and joyfulness of Vraja. Cows with heavy, swinging udders rain milk on the earth. Women's swollen breasts flow, seep, or leak. Krishna and his elder brother, Balaram, drink from the breasts of women and the udders of cows. Flowing milk, whether from breastfeeding women or lactating cows, is auspicious for the whole world. The overflowing breast or udder symbolizes the intense love of mothers for their (male) children.

However the mothering metaphor, whether biological, adoptive or wet-nursing, is far from unproblematic. Wet-nursing may only be framed as a form of maternal relations when such diversion of the woman's lactation is the voluntary choice of the nursing mother, with no adverse implications to her biological child. Enforced wet-nursing and the commodification of lactation as in dairy farms is profuse with violence for the biological mother and child. In her analysis of slave black milking nannies in antebellum southern America, Jones-Rogers (2017: 346) writes that 'within the context of the slave market, enslaved women's bodies, labor, and milk were all "saleable goods".' Historian Marcus Wood argues (2013: 2), 'Black milk, slave

mother's milk, was stolen in vast, unknown, incalculable quantities as generation after generation of white infants "drank, and drank" from the nipples of the "Mammy" and *Mae Preta* [her Brazilian counterpart].'

The commercialisation of lactation means that mothers and infants suffer. The enforced commodification 'black milk' by white families/mothers required the slave mothers to wean their own infants at 6 months of age, while white women breastfed until their child was about 2 years old (Dunaway 2003: 134). Black children might be bottlefed to divert their lactation to white children (West and Knight 2017: 41)—akin to dairy calves being reared on calf-rearing formula. However while only about 20% of white families used slave wet-nurses till their infant was weaned, most humans exploit enslaved cow wet-nurses, typically for the entirety of their lifetimes.

In the context of Hindu women, their objectification as "mother" has been further critiqued by Indian feminist sociologists as profuse with patriarchal violence. Vanaja Dhruvarajan (1990) holds the edification of Hindu women as ideal *wife* and *mother* who preserve an ideal Hindu culture and nation, as almost singularly responsible for their enduring oppression, and their designation to the private spaces of the home as their rightful place. Hindus have been charged with using women's bodies more strategically than Muslims to intensify communal and casteist differences (Gupta 2000). In a similar way, bovine bodies, especially the indigenous breeds, have been burdened with the task of preserving a pure, upper-caste Hindu culture, and likewise, suffer violence for their 'exalted' status. In India, the purity of the sacred cow as mother—much like the purity of Hindu women as mother—is invoked as a political tool by right-wing Hindu groups for the creation of an ideologically 'pure' Hindu Mother India.

The entirety of Krishna's birth story further reveals an extraordinary silence on his *birth-mother*, and some vital and largely unremarked similarities between the child-god Krishna, and the modern-day male calves in commercial dairies. Akin to dairy bull calves, Krishna was born in prison and was separated from his own incarcerated mother *minutes after birth*, *prior to even receiving his first lactation from Devaki, his biological mother*. Krishna was subsequently raised lovingly by his adoptive human mother Yashodha—and the cows. Stories of Krishna tend to celebrate lactation stories from his non-biological mothers, altogether ignoring any inconvenient reference to the suffering of his biological mother. The stories of Krishna's excessive love and attachment to the lactation from his adoptive human and bovine mothers after the total denial of suckle from his biological mother refrain from making this link and remain silent at the possibility of his own primordial anxieties at that separation:

> [when] Krishna was born the infant was spirited away across the monsoon-swollen waters of the Jumna by his father Vasudeva. Vasudeva exchanged him for a girl child who had been born the same night to Yaśodâ and her husband Nanda, the chief cowherders in the Braj countryside that surrounds Mathura. Under their care Krishna waxed and flourished, and it was not long before he began to show an enormous appetite for butter and other milk products—curd particularly, but also milk itself. Of them all, though, butter, with its creamy concentration, was his favorite, and he would do almost anything to get it. (Hawley 1983: 8)

Akin to the eulogisation of Krishna's love of lactation from non-biological mothers, the tendency of humans as species, and particularly in the case of Hindus, is to similarly celebrate the breastmilk from cows who are designated their 'mothers'. The wide significance of the cow and her milk in Hindu scriptures, and use of the cow's milk for human consumption establishes—problematically—the cow as the mother of Hindus. The scriptures seem to selectively recognise the commercialisation of infant lactation as unethical. For instance, Madhava in the Parashara (2.7) advises, 'A Brahman should not sell such things as sesame or ghee, milk, or honey.' (Vidyasagar 2012: 160). However, India's dairying policies which prolifically borrow from the milk mythologies of Hinduism as a commercialisation strategy ignore the violence latent in the commodification of breast/udder milk or the reproductive systems of animals.

The area of feminist psychology and motherhood is well tilled in the case of humans in establishing the mother-child separation, and loss of reproductive control as some of the chief anxieties of the feminist movement (Bhule 1998). These violences are profuse in dairying, and reminiscent of the earliest and most enduring anxieties of the human feminist movement around the politics of safe motherhood. The reproductive and sexualised violence wrought by the dairy industry include repeated forced pregnancies; separation of mother and child; diseases/infections caused by continuous lactations; and finally, the commodification in the sale and purchase of animal bodies (Gillespie 2018/forthcoming; Cusack 2013). These physical and emotional traumas are fundamental to sustain animal agriculture per se and particularly for dairying. Humans have implicitly colonised these traumas as exclusive to our species but increasingly, it is clear that sexualised and reproductive traumas are no more *human* traumas than they are traumas specific to particular races; rather, these are *species* violence (Cusack 2013). In her forthcoming book *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389*, Kathryn Gillespie politicises the numerous traumas experienced by dairy cows. Through extensive ethnographic research, she personalises the cows in the mass, faceless dairy industry in the USA, and describes the anxieties involved in separating mother and child, for both mother and child.

In India, the violence in latent in commodifying animal milk is heavily obscured by the demonisaton of only beef as violent. However, part of his campaign for ahimsa or non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi was acutely aware of the violence done to lactating cows, and their young for their milk. As early as 1917, Mahatma Gandhi raised anxieties about the violence done to cows by Hindus, in the name of Hinduism, and explicitly pointed to dairying operations, run mostly by Hindus in India as examples of some exceptional cruelties:

> Hindu society has been inflicting terrible cruelty on the cow and her progeny. The present condition of our cows is a direct proof of this.…I shudder when I see all this and ask myself how we can say anything to our Muslim friends so long as we do not refrain from such terrible violence. We are so intensely selfish that we feel no shame in milking the cow to the last drop. If you go to dairies in Calcutta, you will find that the calves there are forced to go without the mother's milk and that all the milk is extracted with the help of a process known as blowing. The proprietors and managers of these dairies are none other than Hindus and most

> of those who consume the milk are also Hindus. So long as such dairies flourish and we consume the milk supplied by them, what right have we to argue with our Muslim brethren?

Later, in a speech at the Bettiah gaushala in 1920, Gandhi repeated,

> What is really needed for protecting the cow is that the Hindus themselves should care for her, since they, too, kill her. The barbaric practice of blowing for extracting milk to the last drop, of tormenting oxen, which are the progeny of the cow, by using the goad, and of making them draw loads beyond their strength —these things amount to killing the cow. If we are serious about cow-protection, we must put our own house in order.

Vegetarianism was a chief part of Mahatma Gandhi's striving toward *ahimsa* or non-violence. Far from constituting a mode of passive being, *ahimsa* is understood as an active and engaged practice in Asian religious thinking (Chapple 1993). Chapple (1993: xiii) writes that the 'most notable application [of ahimsa] comes in form of vegetarianism.' While veganism as a political concept for liberation and non-violence had not gained traction at the time, it is clear that Gandhi nonetheless has some notion that an *ahimsic* lifestyle must reject the consumption of all animal products, including lactation. In his autobiography, Gandhi regretted his consumption of cow milk in his ignorance about the abuse meted out to dairy cows. He took to drinking goat's milk, but subsequently acknowledged that he had indeed broken the spirit of his vow to never consume cow milk:

> For although I had only the milk of the cow and the she-buffalo in mind when I took the vow, by natural implication it covered the milk of all animals. Nor could it be right for me to use milk at all, as long as I held that milk is not the natural diet of man. (Gandhi 2018: 699)

The milk of bovines having any role in the dietary or cultural practices of Hindus is not a straightforward interpretation even in the scriptures. A vegan feminist reading of the great legend of the churning of the Ocean of Milk poses a challenge to the co-option and commercialisation of bovine milk as sacred for Hindus. Hinduism regards trees, plants and herbs as also profoundly holy, and key passages and legends in the *Puranas* strongly suggest that Hinduism's holiest milk is in fact vegan and plant-derived.

Vegan Milk: Hinduism's Original Sacred Milk

The greatest Hindu mythology of creation, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, provokes a startling counter-interpretation to the seemingly undisputed sacrality of cow milk in Hinduism. The legend opens the critical possibility that the original sacred milk in Hinduism may not be animal milk at all, but indeed, vegan, plant-based milk. According to the legend, the gods and the 'antigods' or the demons both sought the elusive nectar of immortality and realised that they needed to cooperate to gain it

(Daniélou 1991: 167). They started to churn the oceans together, and the churning of the ocean of milk is called *samudra manthan* (Velten 2010: 39). As the waters were whipped, shaken and agitated, they started to turn milkier and milkier, eventually yielding to ambrosia, 'the essence of life', and various gods, goddesses and celestial beings such as Lakshmi, as well as Surabhi the wish-fulfilling cow (Daniélou 1991: 167). The ocean of milk is known as *kṣīrasāgara* (Patel 2008: 403).

In different versions of the story, the ocean's milky nature derives from different sources—in some versions, the milk is sourced from four cows while in others, it is from a single jet of the celestial cow Surabhi's milk. However, in all cases, the milk was *originally* sourced by the churning together of ocean waters and *sacred herbs and plants* (Hudson 2008: 547). Deborah Valenze describes the great mythology:

> According to the great Hindu story of the Churning of the Ocean, milk assumes a pure and simple guise as a limitless source of bounty. The tale begins with a quest for an elixir of immorality, when Hindu gods took charge of a still chaotic world and decided to stir things up, literally. Using a snake as a rope and a mountaintop as a churning stick, they pulled and writhed *as the sap from plants from the mountain mixed with water from the sea. As the swirling progressed, the ocean water turned to milk* [emphasis mine] and then – following laws of an ordinary dairy – butter. From a rich, congealed mass emerged the sun, moon, and stars, along with Surabhi, the Cow of Plenty. Her offspring have assumed sacred status as four-legged carriers of perfection and reminders of this extravagant genesis. (Valenze 2011: 13).

The great epic Mahabharata also describes the milky ocean as sourced from medicinal herbs and water:

> After the churning, O Brahmana, had gone on for some time, *gummy exudations of various trees and herbs vested with the properties of amrita mingled with the waters of the Ocean* [emphasis mine]. And the celestials attained to immortality by drinking of the water mixed with those gums and with the liquid extract of gold. *By degrees, the milky water of the agitated deep turned into clarified butter by virtue of those gums and juices* [emphasis mine] (*Mahabharata* – Book 1, Section XVII, pp.59)

The conflation of Mother Cow and Mother Earth, likewise, wherein the earth is described as the cow, also disrupt the idea that sacred milk is necessarily sourced only from the cows. As early as the Vedic Sanhitas, descriptions can be found of 'the Earth-Cow Nutrix nourishing Gods and men with her divine milk' (Margul 1968: 71–72). M.C.P. Srivastava (1979: 51–52) writes, 'In the Vedic period Earth goddess is identified with Cow-Goddess as she is called "*go*". Drawing upon the *Rigveda* 1.164.9; *Atharvaveda* 9.9.9; 4.39.2; and *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4, 5.8.10, Srivastava further elaborates in detail on the connections between the cow and the Earth:

> The Earth goddess appears to be identical with cow-goddess. The relation between Earth goddess and the cow or rather cow-goddess is intimate and one of almost complete fusion. The Earth Goddess is called a cow (*Vasā, go, Dhenu*). She is cow by birth (*Janmanā Vasā*). Like Earth goddess, cow goddess is also called Aditi. *So cow-goddess appears to be like Earth-goddess who supplies food to human beings* [emphasis mine]. (Srivastava 1979: 51–52; 60; 61)

Humans, notably, owe no less of a moral obligation to Mother Earth for her welfare, and indeed, it is this care which will yield nourishment. The Mahabharata (Book 12, Section LIX, pp. 127) describes Pṛthu milking the Earth: 'He drew from the earth, as a milcher from a cow, *seven and ten kinds of crops*… [emphasis mine]'. Prthu's role was not that of a milker of cows, but as it were, a responsible and dharmic milker of the Earth, and while the Earth is *like* a cow, she is *not a cow*. Indeed, in this account, milking of the earth-cow led to plant-based agriculture and is 'whence we derive all crops, vegetables and fruits' (Margul 1968: 64). That is, 'harnessing the earth to yield grain and other crops' is 'metaphorically described as milking the earth-cow' (Gupta-Gombrich & Sharma 1996: 377). Book 6 of the Mahabharata (Section IX, pp. 22) states,

> Earth, if its resources are properly developed according to its qualities and prowess, *is like an ever-yielding cow* [emphasis mine], from which the three-fold fruits of virtue, profit and pleasure, may be milked.

The excavation of these accounts offers a starting counter to the problematic narrative of cows and cow milk as sacred, and exalted. Plant and tree veneration are one of the most ancient forms of worship in Hinduism, and the *soma*, one of the most sacred drinks in the Rigveda is extracted from plants (Krishna and Amirthalingam 2014). These critiques underscore the need for Hindus to re-examine their relationship with the plant world in a time of rapid ecological degradation. Hindus are as complex and 'multi-dimensional' as the rest of the human species, and their celebrated worship of trees and plants does not necessarily translate into ecologically conscious citizenship (Kent 2010: 130). An expanded understanding of Hindus' relationship with trees is necessary for more nuanced and empathetic perception of flora at a time of rapid deforestation and climate change (Haberman 2013). At a time of rapid ecological degradation in India substantially due to intensive animal agriculture, a renewed focus on reviving plant-based Hindu practice and a diminished focus on the use of animals as sacred resources is consistent with both animal and environmental ethics.

Conclusions

Milk production has a direct role in the slaughter of cows (and other milch animals) in India, though this is obscured by the framing of beef as uniquely responsible by Hindu nationalist groups to perpetuate violence against Muslims and 'low-caste' Hindus. Cow milk however has a central role in Hindu rituals and beliefs, and cow milk's sacrality is mobilised by both commercial dairying to increase sales, as well as by Hindu

nationalism to advance their idea of a Hindu Indian state. Milk is framed as sacred, nurturing and a rightful product of consumption for the 'human progeny' of willing cow mothers. Such familial invocation of the human-to-cow relationship based on selective scriptural interpretations obscures the harms inherent even in purported relationships of care. In order to render cow protectionism truly meaningful for cows, it is vital to problematise Hindu patriarchal framings of the cow as the mother of humans.

The paper used a feminist vegan framework to critique two popular dairying Hindu legends—Krishna's love of butter and the churning of the Ocean of Milk—to challenge the idea of a willing and endlessly lactating Mother Cow for human progeny. A feminist vegan approach explicitly focusses on milk (and eggs) as also as profuse with harms to animals as meat, and is a critical counter to the hegemonic patriarchal interpretations of Hinduism's milking and mothering legends. The forcible diversion of cow milk from the calf for humans is embedded in the broader context of the anxieties and traumas of mother-child separation, both of Krishna from his biological mother and the calves from the cows. The mythological depictions of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, one of the major Hindu legends of creation, describe the formulation of milk and butter from vegan sources such as plants and water.

Together, the legends offer overdue counters to patriarchal narratives of cow milk as a core ingredient of Hindu rituals and consumption. It challenges the larger species complicity of humans regarding nonhuman lactation as their—and not the animals'—birthright. At a time of escalated violence to marginalised humans and animals in India in the name of cow protection, a feminist vegan critique of the status of the cow and cow milk in Hindu scriptures offers overdue political provocations to the propertied status of nonhuman animals, the commodification of animal lactation, and body parts. To truly protect cows (and other animals enmeshed in dairying) from the harms of human exploitation, it is critical for Hindu ritualistic, cultural and mundane practices to replace the use of animal products with plant-based, vegan offerings.

Acknowledgements I express grateful thanks to the two anonymous reviewers and to Eliza Waters and Gonzalo Villenueva, University of Melbourne, for invaluable research support. The article benefited from support from the Australian Research Council.

References

Adams, C. J. (1993). *The sexual politics of meat*. New York: Continuum.

Adams, C. J. (2010). Why feminist-vegan now? *Feminism and Psychology, 20*(3), 302–317.

Albanese, C. L. (1990). *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bhule, M. J. (1998). *Feminism and its discontents: a century of struggle with psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Chapple, C. K. (1993). *Nonviolence to animals, earth, and self in Asian traditions*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Chaudhery, A. (2014). The force of falsity. Retrieved 23rd November, 2014, from http://www.strays.in/index.php/2014/11/the-force-of-falsity-by-amit-chaudhery/

Chhabra, A., Manjunath, K. R., Panigrahy, S., & Parihar, J. S. (2013). Greenhouse gas emissions from Indian livestock. *Climatic Change, 117*, 329–344.

Chigateri, S. (2008). 'Glory to the cow': cultural difference and social justice in the food hierarchy in India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 31*(1), 10–35.

Chilkoti, A., & Crabtree, J. (2014). India's beef battleground sizzles ahead of election. *Financial Times.* Retrieved 29th September, 2016, from http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/033680fa-027d-11e3-880d-00144feab7de.html#axzz3ki4Hdyc2

Cusack, C. M. (2013). Feminism and husbandry: drawing the fine line between mine and bovine. *Journal for Critical Animal Studies, 11*(1), 24–44.

Daniélou, A. (1991). *The myths and gods of India*. Rochester: Inner Traditions International.

Dasgupta, S. C. (1945). The cow in India—volume I. Calcutta: Khadi Pratisthan.

Dhruvarajan, V. (1990). Religious ideology, Hindu women, and development in India. *Journal of Social Issues, 46*(3), 57–70.

Dunaway, W. A. (2003). *The African-American family in slavery and emancipation*. New York.

FAO. (2015). Dairy production and products. Retrieved 18th December, 2015, from http://www.fao.org/agriculture/dairy-gateway/milk-production/en/#.VnNyQaO4Ybw

First Post. (2017). To teach Muslims 'save the cow' message, RSS to organise Iftar with only cow milk products. Retrieved 28th May, 2017, from http://www.firstpost.com/india/to-teach-muslims-save-the-cow-message-rss-to-organise-iftar-with-only-cow-milk-products-3462918.html

Frazier, J. (2008). Agnihotra. In D. Cush, C. Robinson, & M. York (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (p. 17). London: Routledge.

Gandhi, M. K. (1920). Speech at Bettiah goshala (December 8) *Mahadevbhaini Diary, Vol.* V. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House.

Gandhi, M. K. (2018). *An autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Gillespie, K. (2018/forthcoming). The cow with ear tag #1389. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gupta, C. (2000). Hindu women, Muslim men: cleavages in shared spaces of everyday life, United Provinces c. 1890–1930. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 37*(2), 121–149.

Gupta-Gombrich, S. and Sharma, P.L. (1996). "Pṛthivī/Bhūma". In Kapila Vatsyayan and Bettina Bäumer (eds.) Kalatattvakosa Vol. 3: Primal Elements: Mahabhuta, pp. 363–399.

Haberman, D. L. (2013). *People trees: Worship of trees in northern India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hansen, T. B. (1994). Controlled emancipation: women and Hindu nationalism. *The European Journal of Development Research, 6*(2), 82–94.

Harris, M. (1966). The cultural ecology of India's sacred cattle. *Current Anthropology, 7*(1), 261–275.

Hawley, J. S. (1983). *Krishna: the butter thief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hudson, D. D. (2008). *The body of God: an emperor's palace for Krishna in eighth-century Kanchipuram*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jain, P. (2014). Bovine *dharma*: nonhuman animals and the Swadhyaya Parivar. In N. Dalal & C. Taylor (Eds.), *Asian Perspectives on Animal Ethics: Rethinking the Nonhuman* (pp. 169–178). New York: Taylor and Francis.

Jamison, S. W., & Brereton, J. P. (2014). *The Rigveda: The earliest religious poetry of India (translation)*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jha, D. N. (2002). *The myth of the holy cow*. London: Verso.

Jones-Rogers, S. (2017). '[S]he could … spare one ample breast for the profit of her owner': white mothers and enslaved wet nurses' invisible labor in American slave markets. *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies, 38*(2), 337–355.

Joshipura, P. (2015). India's high beef exports are linked to its milk consumption. Retrieved 16th May, 2016, from http://www.huffingtonpost.in/poorva-joshipura/holy-cow-milk-consumption_b_8087156.html

Kent, E. F. (2010). Forests of belonging: the contested meaning of trees and forests in Indian Hinduism. *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture, 4*(2), 129–138.

King, A. S. (2012). Krishna's cows: ISKON's animal theology and practice. *Journal of Animal Ethics, 2*(2), 179–204.

Korom, F. J. (2000). Holy cow! The apotheosis of Zebu, or why the cow is sacred in Hinduism. *Asian Folklore Studies, 59*(2), 181–203.

Krishna, N., & Amirthalingam, M. (2014). *Sacred plants of India*. New Delhi: Penguin.

Lodrick, D. O. (1981). *Sacred cows, sacred places: origins and survival of animal homes in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lodrick, D. O. (2005). Symbol and sustenance: cattle in South Asian culture. *Dialectical Anthropology, 29*(1), 61–84.

Mahias, M. (1988). Milk and its transmutations in Indian society. *Food and Foodways, 2*, 265–288.

Margul, T. (1968). Present-day worship of the cow in India. *Numen, 15*(1), 63–80.

McKenzie, L. (2018). "Comparing cows to mothers and children does not work as a justification for exploiting them for "ahimsa milk": Part 8 of a Response to Sivarama Swami." accessed 28th February. https://voxvegan.com.

Morrison, K. D. (2014). Conceiving ecology and stopping the clock: narratives of balance, loss, and degradation. In M. Rangarajan & K. Sivaramakrishnan (Eds.), (pp. 39–64). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Murray, R. (1992). *The cosmic covenant: biblical themes of justice, peace and the integrity of creation*. London: Sheed and Ward.

Naqvi, S. (2014). Prime cuts. Retrieved 15th December, 2014, from http://www.outlookindia.com/article/Prime-Cuts/292209

Narayanan, Y. (2018). 'Cow protection' as 'casteised speciesism': sacralisation, commercialisation and politicisation. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies., 41*(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1419794 http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/ZtvN2kha8MsuT7az3k4J/full.

Patel, D. M. (2008). Kāmadhenu. In D. Cush, C. Robinson, & M. York (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. London: Routledge.

Sastri, D. B. K. S. R. (1945). The religion and romance of cow-worship in India. *Kalyana Kalpataru, 11*(1).

Sharma, N. K. (2013). "Miracle under the Lord's feet." 28th May 2013. http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-05-28/news/39580718_1_water-harvesting-system-temple-priest-shiva-temple (5th November 2013).

Simoons, F., J. (1974). The purificatory role of the five products of the cow in Hinduism. Ecology of Food and Nutrition, 3(1), 21.

Singh, R. P.B. (2007) "Gai and ecological awakening: message of Hinduism for deeper understanding", Oriental Anthropologist, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 213–233.

Srivastava, M. C. P. (1979). Mother goddess in Indian art, archaeology & literature. Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi.

USDA. (2017). India remains the world's largest dairy producer. Retrieved 21st August, 2017, from https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=82987

Valenze, D. (2011). *Milk: A local and global history*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Velten, H. (2010). *Milk: A global history*. London: Reaktion Books.

Vidyasagar, I. (2012). *Hindu widow marriage*. New York: Columbia University Press.

von Keyserlingk, M. A. G., & Weary, D. M. (2007). Maternal behavior in cattle. *Hormones and Behavior, 52*(1), 106–113.

West, E., & Knight, R. J. (2017). Mothers' milk: slavery, wet-nursing, and black and white women in the antebellum south. *The Journal of Southern History LXXXIII, 1*, 37–69.

Wiley, A. S. (2014). *Cultures of milk: The biology and meaning of dairy products in the United States and India*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Wood, M. (2013). *Black milk: Imagining slavery in the visual cultures of Brazil and America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.