

# THE REAL LIFE OF HOLY COWS

*Hinduism considers cows to be sacred animals. This has concurred to cows' stereotypical depiction as religious and political icons, especially in chromolithographs that enjoyed a huge appreciation in the last two centuries of Indian history. At a visual level these images were extremely powerful but they did not depict cows as living beings who also struggle, suffer, and die. Today, the digital photographs circulated on the Net by animal activists represent cows as mortal animals and show their real, mundane, hard life on Indian streets, which is very far from the ideal state of holiness one could expect.*

**Text by Deborah Nadal**

## **W**hy Look at Cows?

Hinduism is not a unified, organized, and internally homogeneous religion with a central text dictating beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, the sacredness accorded to the cow is transversal to most of its internal multiplicity. Even though not all Hindus may actually worship her,<sup>[1]</sup> she is usually referred to as *go mata* (mother cow) and, as a living embodiment of motherhood, she is venerated for the fact that she sustains humankind through her milk, dung (used for fuel, cooking, and purifier for the house), urine (useful in medicines), and male offspring (for draught purposes). At a symbolical level the positive qualities ascribed to the cow are numerous (Brown 1964). First of all, she is the personification of unconditional love, gentleness, and self-denial, seen in the care she provides to her calf. Secondly, she embodies abundance, fertility, and generosity. Thirdly, especially in the recurrent comparison with the buffalo, she

represents the utmost purity, perfection, and beauty (Margul 1968). Finally, being considered a theophany (Korom 2000) her body is thought of as the abode of the entire Hindu pantheon composed by 330 million deities, and thus venerating her means honoring them all.

With a peak in the 1960s and 1970s, a consistent number of scholarly works have been devoted to the sacredness of the cow, which has been analyzed from a broad range of perspectives.<sup>[2]</sup> Visual culture studies have been much less interested in this topic, given that Pinney's (2004) remarkable work on chromolithographs as tools for political struggle against the colonial rule in pre-independent India seems to be the only representative of this field of study, magisterially approached through the lens of anthropology and political history. In his "Photos of the Gods. The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India", the sixth chapter, titled "The Politics of Popular Images: From Cow Protection to M.K. Gandhi, 1890-1950", thoroughly describes cows as recurrent, since politically powerful, characters in the chromolithographs that circulated

widely at a popular level during the historical period under study.

Starting from the figure of the cow in chromolithographs, through Pinney's study, this article later moves to the description and analysis of the same subjects as they appear in other visual objects, i.e. digital photographs. While the former mainly depict cows as religious and political symbols, the latter show them as flesh and blood living beings, exposed to physical and psychological miseries. To highlight the huge appreciation chromolithographs enjoyed in the last two centuries of India's religious history, Pinney (2004: 21) argues not for a 'history of art, but a history made by art'. On the contrary, given the more recent nature of digital photographs of cows' distress, their history will not be discussed in this article. Instead, they will be used to reflect on Berger's famous and much-debated question "Why look at animals?"

### **The success of chromolithography in India**

From Ancient Greek, "lithography" literally means "writing on stone". It is a method of printing technically based on the chemical mutual incompatibility of oil and water and on the use of a smooth limestone. An image is mirror-like drawn on the stone with oily hydrophobic ink and then the entire surface is treated with a dilute solution of gum arabic, slightly acidified with nitric acid. The function of this solution is to create a hydrophilic layer that will not accept the printing ink on all non-image surfaces that remain now in relief. When printing, the stone is kept wet with water. An oily lithographic ink is then applied and since it is repelled by water it sticks only onto the original drawing. The ink can thus be transferred to a blank paper sheet, thus producing the expected image.

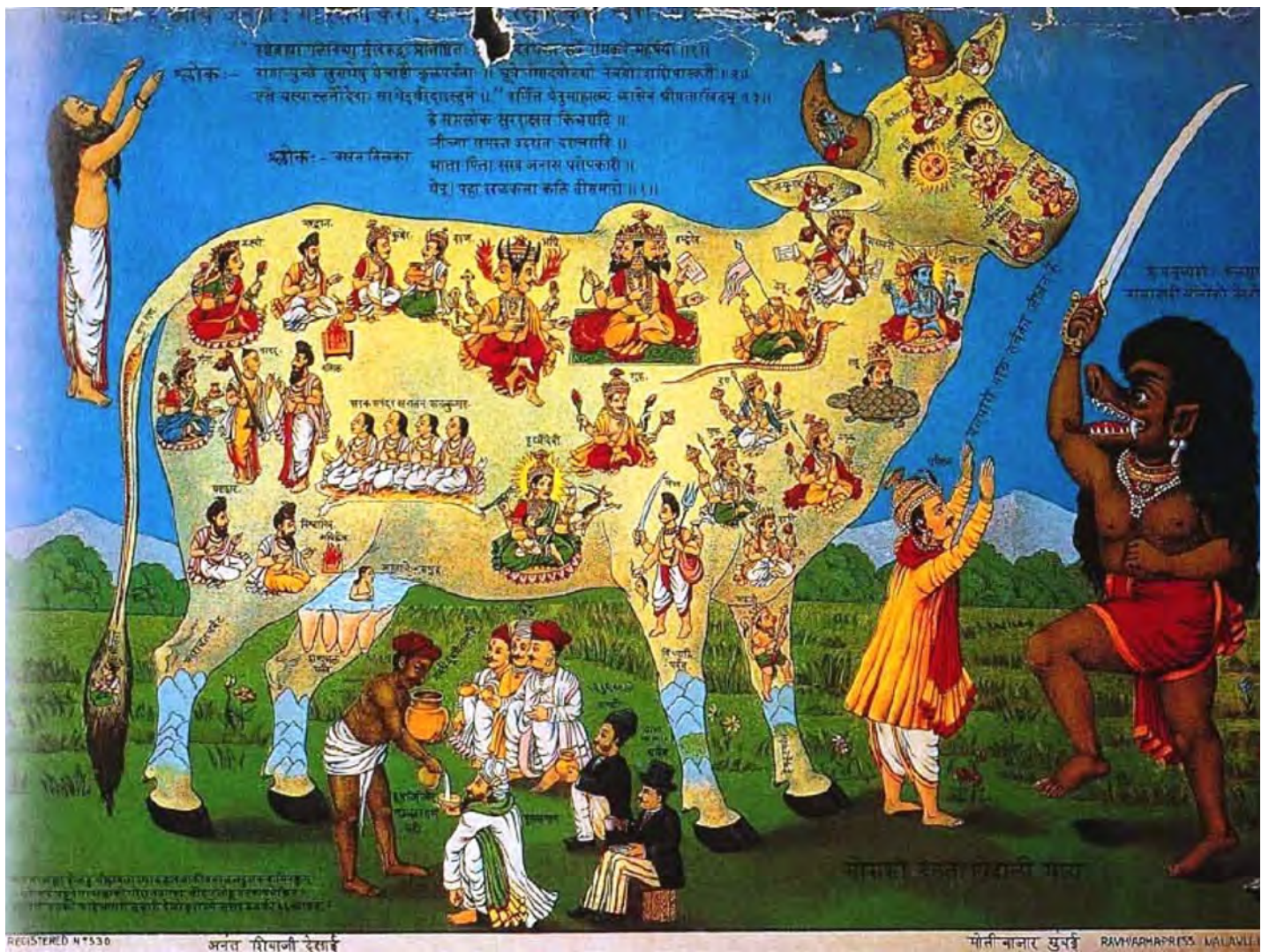
Lithography was invented in 1796 by the author and actor Alois Senefelder, a native of Prague (Czech Republic), as a cheap method to publish his plays. From Munich and Vienna, the cities where lithographic printing gained its first success, the news of the great potential of this invention, thanks to its simplicity and economy, reached India very quickly. In the meanwhile, in Europe, its multi-colored version was invented. Chromolithography was developed by the Frenchman Godefroy Engelmann in 1837 along the same technical process of lithography. If a

chromolithograph has to be made, different stones have to be prepared with as many drawings as the colors of the final work are and a print has to go through the press separately for each stone. If the challenge of keeping the images properly aligned is successfully overcome, nice images consisting of large areas of flat color are reasonably fast and cheaply produced.

Since the 1860s (chromo)lithography enjoyed a great success in India, spreading quickly from Kolkata to other major towns such as Mumbai, Lucknow, and Chennai, where hundreds of lithographic printing houses flourished and lithographs met the appreciation of the general public. Given the multi-linguistic variety of India, a fundamental factor for the success of this printing technique was that the same procedure could be applied to all languages irrespective of their varying scripts, since its basis was the manuscript written by a copyist. However, in India lithographs became famous especially in their colorful version. Alongside artists such as Hem Chander Bhargava and Yogendra Rastogi, Raja Ravi Varma Koil Thampuram (1848-1906), better known as Raja Ravi Varma, made a name for himself as the father of this form of art and nowadays he is still regarded as a master in this field.

Artistically born as a water painter and oil painter, in 1894 Raja Ravi Varma founded a lithographic printing press in Mumbai for re-printing his artwork using chromolithographic techniques, to make his paintings affordable for the general public. Even if Varma passed away in 1906, his chromolithographs continued to be printed in thousands for many years. These pieces of art mainly depicted Hindu gods and goddesses and famous scenes taken from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, two epic poems composed between the fifth century BC and the third century AD that are still exceptionally famous and highly appreciated in contemporary India. Varma's representation of mythological characters has become part of the imagination of the epics themselves and, in general, his chromolithographs have had a profound influence in the shaping of common people's artistic tastes. The popularity of the chromolithographs by Varma was mainly due to his ability to render the images of gods and goddesses exceptionally real, freeing them from the aura of immaterialness and artificiality they were commonly depicted in.

Another recurrent theme in the popular visual



**Fig.1:** Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay (The Cow with 84 Deities), c. 1912, Ravi Varma Press. The original image. Source: Pinney 2004: 109.

culture of pre-independent India were portraits of patriotic inspiration, representing national heroes and political leaders of that time or of the past, such as Tilak, Subhash Chandra Bose, and Shivaji. Within the intense and vivacious period preceding Independence in 1945, this artistic choice and the high mobility of chromolithographs benefited from each other's success and together they concurred to the affirmation of this form of art as a much powerful tool for anti-imperialist propaganda. In fact, it is in view of this political exploitation of chromolithographs that Pinney (2004) carried out his research on printed images, within which the figure of the cow reached an exceptional momentum and underwent a very peculiar transformative process. The next section analyses this, focusing on the symbolic role ascribed to the cow.

### Nothing more than an icon

From the Hindu point of view, Fig.1 is an extremely popular image really speaks a thousand words. Moreover, it does this at two levels. The first one pertains to the religious sphere. Here, the body of the cow is filled with the symbolic references I mentioned in the introductory section of this article. As the title reads, 84 gods and goddesses are depicted in her body, all with their name and the precise iconographic details that unequivocally identify each of them. However, to an attentive eye, allegoric speculations do not end here. In fact, instead of her eyes, she has the sun and the moon, her legs are the high mountains of Himalaya, and her udders are compared to the oceans (Sharma 1980). This last detail reminds the well-known myth of

the churning of the ocean (in Sanskrit, Samudra manthana, Sagara manthana, or Kshirasagara manthana) to which cows are closely connected. This myth explains the origin of amrita, the nectar of immortality, for which devas (gods) and asuras (demons) tenaciously fought in a tug of war that took place in this ocean of milk. Not only the cow Kamadhenu emerged from this ocean (and she was given by the gods to the sages so that the ghee (clarified butter) obtained from her milk could be used for religious rituals), but this sweet and rich ocean is thought to exist in the Goloka, the world or planet of cows that is the eternal Supreme Abode of only some deserving gods, such as Krishna and his beloved Radha.

The second level in which this chromolithograph is eloquent is the political one, which is the main interest of Pinney's book. His work and many others (e.g. Freitag 1980) focus on the exploitation of the figure of the cow (and thus of her image) as a potent weapon in India's fight for the political autonomy from the British rule and, more in general, in the affirmation of Hindu religious solidarity against Muslim and Christian invaders. Cow protection movements, more or less institutionalized, have a long history in India and in the past as well as nowadays they usually mobilize the sacred and emotive symbol of the mother cow to reach their aim of a total ban on cow slaughtering and beef eating. In the last decades of the 19th century, when chromolithograph printing and burgeoning Indian nationalism fruitfully met, politics was highly regulated while religion could enjoy a larger margin of freedom. So, as the circulation of seditious images was tightly controlled, the image of the cow, of evident religious origin, was theoretically innocent since insignificant. Her image was clearly at the convergence between religion and politics, but whenever needed only the most advantageous side of the coin could be shown.

For the audience interested in the political side of figure 1, it was not difficult to immediately go to the messages beyond it that are implicit in the iconographic choices of the artist. Below the cow udders, a Hindu offers her milk to a Muslim, a Christian/European, and a Parsi,<sup>[3]</sup> under the slogan 'drink milk and protect the cow' (Pinney 2004: 107). Through this gesture not only cow milk is praised, but also the appropriateness of milk drinking, compared to beef eating, is stressed. On the right side, a demon

menacingly waves a sword before her, this alluding to the sin (from a Hindu perspective) of cow slaughtering. In fact, a Hindu man, depicted between the cow and the demon, tries to make the demon give up his intention. The rhetoric of nationalism, deeply linked to religious separatism, is obvious in this image. Equally evident is how the sacred submits to the political, making the boundary between these two separable domains blurry. This was done not only to escape censorship,<sup>[4]</sup> but also to turn the cow into a symbol charged with all the possible meanings useful to inflame nationalist sentiments and draw a line between those who identified themselves with these meanings and those who could hardly understand them, being unfamiliar with this religious allegoric language. In fact, as written by Pinney (2004: 114) 'Allegory offers the theoretical possibility of closure. "Meanings" can be specified and secured: producers and consumers can agree (or rather attempt to agree) that under the prevailing code a particular sign stands in for another sign'.

Of course, not all the chromolithographs depicting mythical and religious subjects have had a second life as tools for political action. Many remained within their domain, continuing to be circulated by their authors and accepted by their audience only for the evident, easily understandable because culturally shared ideas they were meant to express. This is the case also for those chromolithographs portraying cows, such as the one in figure 2.

This chromolithograph is very classic as far as the choice of the subject is concerned, as it represents one of the most famous scenes of the early life of the much beloved, and thus extremely popular, god Krishna.<sup>[5]</sup> Krishna is also known as Govinda, Gopala, or Gopinatha, where the suffix "go" stands for "cow", "cattle". Within the Hindu pantheon, he is the cowherd, often depicted while grazing his cows or while playing the flute for them. In figure 2 Krishna is still a young boy who tenderly hugs his mother Yashodha while she is milking a cow. This god is well known for his love for milk and butter, that he eats with great gluttony and occasionally even steals. As it happens in this figure, the cow who is depicted while providing him and his mother with milk shows the typical features that orthodox Hinduism ascribes to this animal. Her hair is predominantly white to symbolize purity; her body is massive but at the same time round





**Fig.2:** *Yashodha and Krishna 2''*, Ravi Varma Press. Source: website of the catalogue of Raja Ravi Varma's prints, lithographs and oleographs.

## The living being behind the photograph

Nowadays chromolithographs do not enjoy the same level of public esteem they received in the past. Their much recognizable style and their classical subjects remind of the past and look kitsch, and so they are increasingly becoming quite a niche product. Moreover, the cheapness, easiness, and quickness that assured their large circulation, thus concurring to their success, cannot stand anymore the comparison with the main revolution photography has gone through in the last 20 years, i.e. digital photographs. Thanks to the Net and the social media digital photographs circulate at an unprecedented pace and, above all, their sharing is by now a spontaneous act for most of Net users. Moreover, given the democratic atmosphere in which nowadays it is not necessary to be an artist to take and spread photographs, theoretically everybody can catch anything on camera.

In India, especially in its urban areas, cows are often caught on camera. This is made especially by animal welfare activists, who work to ensure cows' well-being or, at least, to inform people about the bad and often illegal living conditions they are kept in<sup>[7]</sup>. Usually, they are depicted during their transfer to slaughterhouses or when they have already reached this final destination. Predictably, the representation of cows that emerges from these photographs could not be more different from the one that is provided by chromolithographs. In these photographs, cows are living beings, not icons. They do not stand for anything idyllically religious and do not imply evident political messages. In most of the cases, they want to show cows as mortal animals who struggle and suffer, after having lived a life that usually is very far from the ideal model one could expect for an animal who is considered sacred. These photographs depict cows who are routinely abused, exploited, starved to death, and killed. In view of the impact that their authors hope to make on the public, generally these photographs do not spare the most distressing details of cows' suffering, resulting in shocking, often unimaginable, images.

The group of four images in figure 3 tells the story of a calf who was found with a broken leg on the roadside in Chennai in March 2016. The first photograph immortalizes the calf while lying on the

and buxom; her posture is elegant and she is usually depicted while remaining calm and still to facilitate her milking; her fatty bump, big ears, and long horns are emphasized, since they are typical of zebus;<sup>[6]</sup> her head is adorned with garlands and flowers, as a proof of the love and care that people give her.

Even if in this figure no particular political message is explicit, the cow is highly stereotyped and remains iconic. What is important in this scene, and in many others similar to this one that represent the moment of milking, is not the cow in herself but what she gives to humans, such as milk in this case. A very utilitarian attitude is expressed in this image, although the entire scene is given an idyllic, almost metaphysical, aura. After all, the cow remains a sacred animal, whose suffering and distress are almost inconceivable and thus not depicted. On the contrary, this happens in digital photographs, which are taken expressly to show cows as mundane animals.



March. 2016  
Chennai

## Calf with a Broken Leg & Maggots, Rescued, Treated & Sheltered



PEOPLE FOR CATTLE IN INDIA  
Our Animals, Our World

f Peopleforcattleinindia

Fig.3:

Calf with a broken leg who has been rescued and had its leg amputated. Source: Facebook page of 'People For Cattle In India'.

ground, with the bone of its leg totally exposed. After having been rescued and transferred to a veterinary hospital, the calf had its leg cleaned of the maggots that immediately infect these wounds, particularly during the summer heat. Here the stump of its leg is in the foreground, with the hands of three people around it that extract one by one the maggots from its wound and put them in the container, where other maggots have already been drowning. After the amputation of the leg, the calf is now recovering. It is depicted while standing on its three legs, with its bandaged stump well evident.

Figure 4 shows ten cows (in the background) and buffaloes (in the foreground) crammed on a truck, with their heads and bodies tightly tied by ropes. The animals are unable to move and do not have the space provided for by law (*The Transport of Animals Rules,*

1978), i.e. from 1 sq m for an animal who weights up to 200 kg, to 2 sq m for one whose weight is double. They seem to be quite calm, resigned, or maybe just too tired or scared to put up resistance.

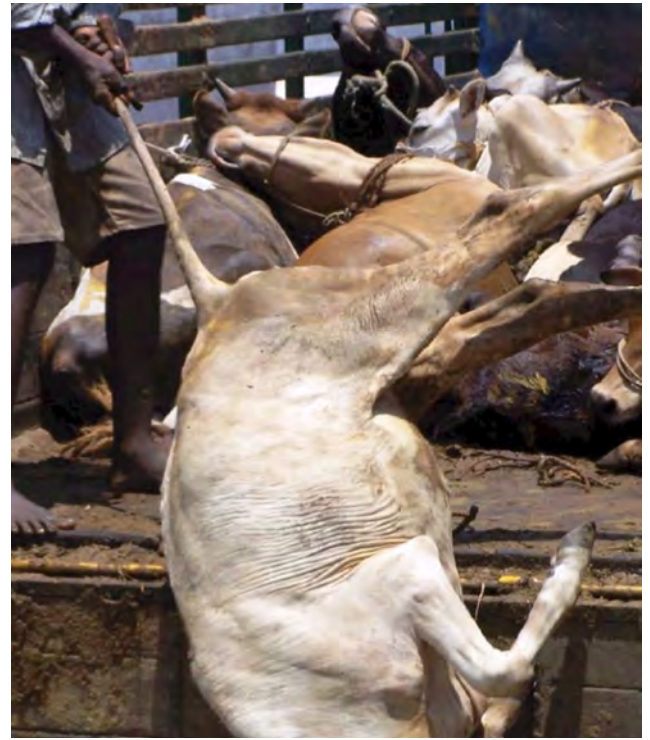
According to Chapter 4 of *The Transport of Animals Rules, 1978*, to load and unload cattle from vehicles 'suitable ropes and platforms should be used'. In figure 5 this cow is loaded on a truck by a man who pulls her by her tail. Within the frame of the photograph, of the cow we can only see her tense body, her stretched tail, and her legs moving in the air in search of a point of support. She is upside-down and her head is not included in the photograph. In the background, uncountable animals lie confusedly on the truck, their heads tied, their necks unnaturally bent, and their bodies twisted.

Figure 6 focuses on a painful detail of the





**Fig.4:** Cows and buffaloes in an overloaded truck, available on the website of PETA



**Fig.5:** Cow loading, leaflet *Inside the Indian Dairy Industry: A Report on the Abuse of Cows and Buffaloes Exploited for Milk* published by PETA

conditions in which cattle are transferred throughout India. On the white hair moistened by tears, several yellowish chili pepper seeds have just come out of the eye of this cow, causing the lachrymation that furrows her cheek. Some seeds are also on the rope that is tied around her head. The reason of the much irritating seeds in the eye is that when cattle collapse from exhaustion during transfer (whether by truck or on foot), they have them rubbed into their eyes to be forced to keep moving.

Most cattle– transfers across India end up in slaughterhouses, such as the one depicted in figure 8. It is the registered, municipal slaughterhouse of a small town in Central India. As many others in the country, it is quite basic in its amenities. The area where cattle are kept in the last moments of their lives and then killed is a simple open space with a sluice all around it where to channel the water used to clean up the blood and the parts of the body that are wasted. In this photograph, on the floor wet by water and blood, internal organs, a large piece of skin, and the skull of a cow are scattered. A puppy eats up the intestines. In this image the figure of the cow is not even distinguishable: only her pieces are there.

In India, the number of illegal slaughterhouses

goes well beyond that of the registered ones, where the conditions in which animals are kept and slaughtered should at least be monitored and adapted to the standards demanded by law. Figure 7 shows a cow who lies on the ground, in the open, with her four legs fastened by a rope and the neck slain. Under the head, almost cut off, a pool of blood in the process of clotting is there. Three colors (the white of the fur, the dark grey of the ground, and the red of the blood) make this image, and the scene it depicts, particularly strong.

In figure 9 the fate of the luckiest among the cows who live on Indian streets is shown. In the street garbage is the main source of food for these animals, who constantly “graze” on carpets and heaps of undifferentiated rubbish. Given the physical conformation of their mouth and teeth, they are unable to properly select the food they eat, so they regularly swallow items that are injurious to their health, such as plastic bags, threads, stones, and iron meshes. In the long run, these foreign objects clog cows' digestive process and lead to a lingering death, unless they are surgically removed. Figure 10 shows a cow undergoing this operation. In this photograph the cow is only partially





**Fig.6 and 7:**

Cow with chili seeds in her eyes, available on the website of PETA and Slaughtered cow. Source: website of Occupy for animals!

visible: we see her back and, on a flank, the opening through which several hands pull the plastics out<sup>[8]</sup>. Suffering is not explicitly seen: it is imagined and possibly felt.

### **Conclusion: why not look at animals?**

This article has described how the visual representation of cows has changed considerably in India in the last decades. In particular, it has focused on the comparison between chromolithographs and





**Fig.8:** Internal organs of a cow left on the floor of a slaughterhouse. Source: website of *The Voice of Stray Dogs/Animal Rescue Org*

**Fig.9:** The plastic debris that were inside the stomach of the cow in the foreground. Source: website of the *Visakha Society for the Protection and Care of Animals*

**Fig.10:** Cow undergoing a rumenotomy to remove plastic debris from her stomach. Source: website of the *Visakha Society for the Protection and Care of Animals*

digital photographs and on the diametrically opposed image of cows they produce. The former depicted cows as icons, whether within the religious or the political domain. Cows were represented with recurrent, highly standardized features that were necessary not only to convey precise ideas and messages, but also to be easily and quickly recognizable, and thus “readable”, by the public that by then was already well educated to this task. Not to puzzle the audience, every detail of the body of these cows followed quite defined criteria, also meant to bear a specific allegoric meaning. By reading Pinney’s (2004: 107) work it is clear how in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the cow turned into a sectarian emblem of Hindu identity or, to use the author’s words ‘a proto-nation, a space that embodies a Hindu cosmology’ (emphasis mine).

In the chromolithographs widely spread in the historical period analyzed by Pinney, cows were not cows and were not looked at as cows with the aim of knowing more about them as animals, as living beings. On the contrary, in them the public searched for confirmation of already known ideas within the religious and political discourse, or even for a shared Hindu space of mutual understanding, group solidarity, and social inclusivity. So, besides the exceptional technical quality of these chromolithographs, as far as their contents are concerned the result is a quite clichéd image of the cow. She is praised as a mother, as a provider and nurturing presence, but she is rarely given an active role. More usually (as in figure 2) she is passively milked, thus appearing more as a dispenser. Or, as in figure 1, she appears completely still, surrounded by humans who give her a (political) reason to be in the image, for example by sharing her milk or protecting her from slaughtering.

In the more modern digital photographs cows are the focus of the scene. Moreover, every photograph seems to have been taken to tell the story of that particular cow. After all, cows are here shown as living beings, and as it happens for living beings, individual peculiarities are what makes the difference and gives sense to every life. Since in the case of the photographs shown in this article their authors were usually animal activists, these images are clearly linked by the same thread, i.e. the aim of witnessing the pain experienced by these animals in order to stimulate the public to take action against the factors that cause it

(i.e. the use of leather, non-vegetarian/vegan food choices, etc.). For this reason, the most distressing details of their sufferance are not hidden, not only to avoid minimizing it but also to touch more deeply the feelings of the public. Within the circle of animal activism, in India as well as abroad, shocking images of this kind have become an everyday encounter on the Net and the social media. The bodies of the cows that in politically exploited chromolithographs were infested with the divine, to paraphrase Pinney (2004: 107), are now infested with maggots who tirelessly devour them.

While in 1977 Berger asked “Why look at animals?”, now, these digital photographs appear to emerge precisely from the incredulous question animal activists seem to be asking us, i.e. “Why don’t look at animals?”. As a matter of fact, whoever has ever visited India could understand the thinking behind this question: considering the uncommon quantity of animals who live on the streets of that country, it seems impossible not to see them. However, I think that the crucial point lies here: “to see” and “to look” imply two very different physical and mental attitudes, and people in India do not seem to look at cows (in the conscious and proactive way animal activists hope) possibly because they are too used to see them. These photographs are probably meant to tear the film of normality that seems to envelop suffering animals. Close to the concept behind Lev Tolstoj’s famous sentence “If slaughterhouses had glass walls everybody would be vegetarian”, the aim of the authors and spreaders of these photographs seems to be showing what is behind the leather industry, witnessing the dark side of the meat industry, revealing the level of pain caused by the production of milk, etc. Through these photographs, people may not only open their eyes and turn them to what they possibly ignored before, but also stop, focus their attention, feel their emotions, develop their opinion, and eventually act to change this poor state of affairs. Maybe these digital photographs will not become immortal as their forefathers, i.e. chromolithographs, seem to be, but this is not their purpose: they exist for the living beings they depict.

## Notes

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[1] Similarly, not all Hindus abstain from eating beef. However, the complex and highly debated topic of cow slaughtering and beef eating cannot be discussed here.



In India the most common bovines are cattle – *Bos Taurus*, and buffaloes – *Bubalus bubalis*. As buffaloes are not considered sacred they will not be treated in this paper. The noun “cattle” encompasses both sexes, while “cow” identifies only the adult female. However, the plural feminine form “cows” is generally used colloquially to refer to both sexes collectively. Thus, because of this reason and the peculiar religious status of cows, the term “cow” will be widely used in this article. When replaced by the pronoun, whenever possible “her” will be preferred to “it”, as in India it sounds more appropriate for such a special animal.

[2] Among others, anthropology in Harris 1966 and Wiley 2014, politics in Copland 2005, Diener et al. 1978, and Robb 1986, economics in Dandekar 1969 and Heston 1971, geography in Lodrick 1981 and Simoons 1979, history in Jha 2001 and Yang 1980, law and social studies in Chigateri 2011, history of religion in Doniger O’Flaherty 1979.

[3] The Parsi are the members of the Zoroastrian community based in India. Their religion differs considerably from orthodox Hinduism, sharing more features with Christianity and Islam.

[4] While escaping the British censorship was the aim of many printing houses in pre-Independence, compromises had often to be accepted. An example is the chromolithograph “*Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay*” (figure 1) that was soon amended by cutting off the right portion of the image where the demon threatens the cow with a sword.

[5] According to Pinney (2004: 107) originally the two people who appear in this chromolithograph were simply a woman and a Hindu boy. Only later, an arbitrary decision taken by the Ravi Varma Press transmogrified them into Yashodha and Krishna and opened ‘the way for the communalist readings to which the image was subject in practice’. Again, politics and religion are invading their respective domains.

[6] A zebu, whose scientific name is *Bos primigenius indicus* or *Bos taurus indicus*, is a species of domestic cattle autochthonous of South Asia.

[7] However, I do not mean to claim that animal activism is exempt from involvement in politics.

[8] For further information see the “Plastic Cow Project” carried out by Karuna Society for Animals and Nature: <http://www.theplasticcow.org/>. Their documentary “The Plastic Cow” is available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SifRIYqHfcY>

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After a BA in Hindi Language and a MA in Cultural Anthropology, Ethnology and Ethnolinguistics at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice (Italy), in 2014 **Deborah Nadal** completed her PhD in Anthropological Sciences at Verona University (Italy), with a thesis on the human-animal relationship on Indian streets. Affiliated to the Department of Humanities of Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, she is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the Wenner Gren Foundation of New York. She has carried out extensive fieldwork in India, particularly in Jharkhand, Odisha, Rajasthan and Delhi. Her research interests include the human-animal relation, zoonotic diseases, public health, and ethnoveterinary. She has published in several peer-reviewed academic journals and is now working on the publication of her first book, thanks to the Hunt Post-doctoral Fellowship.