

Cow Protection and Hare Krishna Philosophy at New Vrindaban, West Virginia

Global Leadership Center, Ohio University
Katherine Bercik and Samantha Bergstein

Introduction:

The cow plays a number of roles within the world's diverse cultural and religious landscape. Some cultures may revere the creature as holy while others may regard cows as simply beasts of burden or sources of meat. The Hare Krishna movement, a branch of Hinduism, encourages vegetarianism and non-violence toward all living creatures. These beliefs have placed animals, especially cows, in a very safe environment at the Hare Krishna community in New Vrindaban, West Virginia. This research report will examine the International Society for the Protection of Cows, a cow sanctuary at New Vrindaban, as well as the philosophical aspects of Hinduism and the Hare Krishna religion that further explain cows' roles and contributions to Hare Krishna society.

The International Society for the Protection of Cows:

The International Society for the Protection of Cows (ISCOWP), which is located within New Vrindaban, began in 1990. The organization promotes alternative agricultural practices that use cows beyond their milk rearing years and also helps to rescue cows in danger. Instead of killing cows for their meat, the strong animals are used to help plow fields and provide fertilizer for the community's gardens and crops (ISCOWP 2010). Vegetarianism is deeply engraved into Hare Krishna philosophy. The cow protection center does not support the slaughter of any animals; however, cows are seen as particularly sacred. In his interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Hare Krishna's holy book, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who is credited with bringing Krishna Consciousness to America, wrote the following: "Of all kinds of animal

killing, the killing of cows is the most vicious because the cow gives us all kinds of pleasure by supplying milk. Cow slaughter is an act of the grossest type of ignorance” (Prabhupada 1989). This very assertion is found within the *Rig Veda*, which is regarded as the oldest of the Sanskrit scriptures (Holland and Nooten 2008).

At ISCOWP, cows are used not only for providing milk but for providing labor, replacing the need for farm machinery (ISCOWP 2010). Balabhadra manages New Vrindaban’s ISCOWP farm and sees this method of labor as “tough love.” By working the male cows in such a way, a deeper bond is created between humans and cows (Balabhadra 2010). To further encourage the humane treatment of cows and other animals, the organization also uses methods of education and vegetarian preservation (ISCOWP 2010). An adoption program is also active through New Vrindaban and present across the country in other Hare Krishna communities (Reddy 2009).

While the number of cows residing at the farm drastically dropped from over 400 in recent years to the current 80 bovines – due to financial issues – the care of the cows continues to be an integral part of the community. Residents have been resilient to continue living with the cows, which are considered to be “like members of the family” (Reddy 2009). The cows are deeply respected because of their connection to the land, their ability to provide nourishment through milk as well as the importance of the use of their manure as fertilizer for crops in the community. Within the *Rig Veda* there are many references to the cow, the creature mainly appearing as metaphors for rain, fertility and wealth (Radice 1981). The ISCOWP facility itself has scriptural influences and is “modeled after the childhood home of [...] Krishna” (Reddy 2009).

Hinduism and Hare Krishna Philosophy:

Before one can understand particular aspects of Hare Krishna beliefs pertaining to the treatment of cows and other animals, a brief explanation of basic Hindu beliefs is needed. The Hare Krishna movement is just one form of worship within Hinduism. One very important concept in Hinduism is the belief in karma and reincarnation: After one's material body dies, their never-changing soul is reborn (reincarnated) into a new body. The soul's new body depends on the previous life's balance of good deeds and bad deeds (karma) or consciousness. For instance, if a person spends most of their life thinking of food, it is believed that person's soul will become reincarnated into the body of a gluttonous animal, such as a pig (Prabhupada 1989). However, by linking the soul with God, one achieves Moksha (paradise). Each person achieves this by fulfilling their devotional service or religious duty, which is known as dharma.

It is believed to be degrading to be reincarnated as an animal, but animals must carry out their dharma like every other living being (Prabhupada 1997). However, Hindus also believe that animals cannot acquire karma because they act upon instinct as opposed to free will. They are completely controlled by the modes of nature – the need to eat, sleep, defend and reproduce (Prabhupada 1989). So how can one's soul become elevated if it resides in the body of an animal? Prabhupada wrote that by simply hearing the transcendental vibration of the Maha Mantra chant (Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare, Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare), even souls embodied within lower entities such as animals can become purified (Prabhupada 1989). The practices of the members, devotees and residents of New Vrindaban, as well as those who operate ISCOWP, shed much light on the nature of the relationship between man and animal in the Hare Krishna communal setting.

Life and Death of Cows in New Vrindaban:

During a May 7 visit to New Vrindaban's cow protection center, guests were greeted by a somewhat dismayed Balabhadra. Before he could show the visitors the facility, Balabhadra needed to visit with a beloved cow that was in the process of passing away. Insisting that the guests join him, Balabhadra lead the visitors to a small barn near the temple where the Maha Mantra could be heard playing in the corner of the cow's stall. The mood in the barn was sullen yet spiritual. A devotee stood to the side, praying for the cow's soul. It was an extremely emotional time for all members of the community. While dying, cows are treated with the same love and regard as family members. Euthanasia is forbidden due to the belief that God has supreme control over life and death, but the cows are made comfortable in their last days and hours. Opiates are not used in the community, but cows are often given over-the-counter pain medication to relieve pain. The ritual in this situation was identical to that of a dying human: If available, tulsi leaves are placed in the mouth of the dying and water from the sacred rivers of India is used as well. Garlands from the temple deities are placed on the animal while the Maha Mantra is chanted or played, guiding the soul to the heavens (Balabhadra 2010).

Balabhadra discussed the importance of "loving exchanges" between humans and creatures. He stated that because all souls are equal, they should be treated as equals. This sense of equality stems from the upbringing and teachings of Lord Krishna.

The Mother Cow and Lord Krishna:

Krishna's legend is considered to be closely related to the holiness of cows. He grew up in a cowherd community and was given the name "Govinda," which means "One who gives pleasure to the cows" (Rosen 2004). There are many stories within *The Mahabharata*, one of ancient India's two Sanskrit epics, that mention Lord Krishna's connection to cows during his youth (Smith 2009).

International Society of Krishna Consciousness founder Swami Prabhupada himself emphasized the importance of living harmoniously with animals, cows in particular, rather than using them for meat. He stated that “The blood of the cow is very nutritious, but civilized men utilize it in the form of milk [...] This is civilized life – not directly killing an animal and eating its flesh” (Rosen 2004). There is also a connection between a cow’s milk and maternity (Rosen 2004). Prabhupada put emphasis the importance of cows as a mother figure for this very reason. “Earth and cow are ‘mother goddesses,’” in Hare Krishna beliefs (Rosen 2004). It is thought that the “Mother cow is, in many ways, better than the mother who gave us our birth” due to the ability for cows to provide milk and the usefulness of cows after death (Rosen 2004). Therefore, “how we treat cows and how we treat the Earth—and thus ourselves—are inextricably related” in New Vrindaban (Rosen 2004). New Vrindaban’s community relationship with cows is “both sacred and secular, spiritual and utilitarian,” thus supporting the importance of interconnectedness and codependence in Hare Krishna communities (Rosen 2004).

Conclusion:

The emphasis on the relationship between humans and cows in Hare Krishna has been passed on from deep cultural Indian roots. The New Vrindaban community continues to fight for their animal friends in order to provide a decent life for them. The cow farm of New Vrindaban displays the respect and love for cows as is believed shared by Lord Krishna himself. Given its strong emphasis on non-violence and vegetarianism, the Hare Krishna movement has a set of practices and rituals that now guarantee the safety and respect of all animals.

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