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MOO, MILK AND THE MUNDARI:

the Mystique of the Cow



“Money can’t buy happiness, but it can buy Cows. And that is pretty much the same thing,” a quote I can’t recollect who to attribute to, but it surely establishes the exalted status cow enjoys amongst the livestock fraternity, beyond mere economic interests. Hinduism may have taken it to new heights, but the cow evokes a unique sentimental attachment, not shared by many other livestock species, all across the world.

Recognised as a symbol of prosperity, strength and motherly love, the cow is considered sacred in Hinduism; a divine creature reflecting fertility and bountifulness. The deep religious and spiritual affiliation of Hinduism with the cow is recognised the world over. Milk evokes similar devotional sentiments in diverse societies and cultures.

“Land flowing with milk and honey” is how symbolically a place of prosperity and abundance has been traditionally described. The Bible uses this expression over and over again as a hyperbole to a Garden of Eden like paradise containing all the riches of the universe. Likewise, milk is considered a life sustaining drink in Hinduism having purifying qualities. Thus it is no surprise that milk is symbolically used for bathing too in quite a few rituals. Milk is a powerful symbol within most cultural traditions. It is universally acknowledged as the fluid of eternal life, fertility and abundance. In some religious and cultural traditions, it is known as the food of the gods and the first human diet. The reverence and

Holy Cow! The oft used phrase loses its exclamatory sheen when translated into Hindi. What does the exclamation mean then? It is an expression of surprise, nay bewilderment. The origin of the slang is said to be the United States of America. Why should a beef eating society express reverence to the cow prefixing it with the adjective holy?

Cows are truly one of the most amazing creatures. Despite the size and bulk they carry, they can run at a speed of 40 kilometres an hour while retaining their ability of a more than 300 degree visual field. Curiously, they can achieve this athletic excellence with only four hours of sleep, and chewing food for eight hours moving their jaws 40,000 times. If this was not enough, these graceful animals are extremely social and often travel in herds. Besides these and many more incredible abilities, cows have profound symbolism attached to them.



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worship of the cows by the Hindus is motivated by the fact that they provide life sustaining milk, hence for them it symbolises the mother, the creator. Likewise, some tribes in the continent of Africa nurture a strong belief that it was a tiny drop of milk that led to creation of the universe. And then milk is believed to be a provider not only of robust physical health and high energy but also of intelligence and wisdom. No doubt therefore, that the power of the cow is incredible, encompassing all facets of life from basic food to a strong influence on religious, social and cultural dimensions; besides the immense potential of economic transformation.

There is also an extremist fringe which defies science and attributes, with great passion, surreal virtues, other than milk, to each and every attribute of the cow; the dung and urine being atop are not considered mere body waste and refuse but as elixirs. Are such extraordinary convictions our exclusive prerogative? Don't be surprised to learn that there is another community whose passion, devotion and a die-hard commitment to the cow far surpasses our home grown champions of the desi cow. The love and worship of the cow that the Mundari tribe of South Sudan in the African continent display is unparalleled. Probably, our most devout among the cow devotees would feel embarrassed when confronted with the devotion of an ordinary

Mundari tribe person.

The Mundari tribe is a small ethnic group in the Republic of South Sudan, numbering between 70,000 and 100,000 people. The river Nile and its surrounding valley is the source that nourishes them and their livestock. The Mundari follow a mixture of Christian and animistic beliefs, with symbols playing an important role. They are agro-pastoralists with an economy centred on agriculture and herding livestock. It is said, quite rightly too, that it would be impossible to find a more dedicated group of herdsmen than this tribe who lives on the banks of the Nile north of Juba, the capital of South Sudan. Their entire lifestyle revolves around caring for their prized livestock, the Ankole-Watusi, a breed of horned cattle known both as the "kings of the cattle" and "the cattle of kings." Could there be a greater glorification of

an animal, that too the one which has been domesticated. Interestingly, our contribution to the royal status this cattle commands is quite significant.

Ankole-Watusi cattle is a part of the Sanga family of the African cattle breeds which originated over 2,000 years ago as a crossbred of Zebu longhorns from India and the Egyptian longhorn cattle. Sanga cattle spread throughout Africa leading to the development of several different breeds. Scientific studies suggest that the big horns of the Ankole-Watusi are an evolution for adaptation to hot climates, facilitating the dispersal of excess body heat. The resilience this breed of cattle demonstrates is a tribute to the hardiness of one of its ancestors too, the Zebu of India.

Look around the globe and you'd find that many of the prominent amongst the cattle breeds, the Brahman, Girlando, Ankola-Watusi etc. all have in their genetic composition the Indian Zebu.

In the Mundari culture, like ours and many other tribes, cows play an important role in birth, marriage and death, and a host of religious rituals. They are symbols not only of wealth and prosperity but of power too. Every life event includes a reference to cows, the lives of which are, at times, considered more important than those of humans. A person's position in society is established through the ownership of cattle, interest-



ingly the size and shape of the horns are the most important and prized features. Traditionally, Ankole-Watusi cows, quite like our desi, are considered sacred, with an owner's wealth counted in live animals. Unfortunately, and akin to our situation, cattle are also a common source of conflict. Clashes seldom arise over common resources such as land but often over cows, and their ownership and the attached sentimentalism.

The Mundari cows are, undoubtedly, among the world's most pampered animals, equalling, if not excelling the love of pet owners. In fact, our love for the cow could at best be individuals or small groups displaying a modicum of commitment, here is a whole community tending to them like their own children. The Mundari massage these cows twice a day; and with the fine talcum powder derived from the ash from the burnt dung. This talcum powder is rubbed into the cattle's skin and also used as its bedding. Swatting of flies from the herd's most prestigious cattle is done through ornamental tassels.

Tariq Zaidi, a UK based renowned photographer of culture and communities, describes his encounter with the Mundari as "almost every man I met wanted me to take a picture of them with their favourite cow." Their wives and children, on the other hand, were given short shrift. The Mundari sleep among their cattle, "literally two feet away from their favourites" says Zaidi, and guard them at the point of a gun. It is considered perfectly reasonable for the tribe to go to any lengths to protect its cattle.

Ashes are used as a natural antiseptic to protect the skin of not only the cows but the people too. Besides massaging the cattle with the ash talcum, the Mundari also use it as a toothpaste for themselves. The cattle urine is used to wash hands and the face; curiously to clean the teeth and bleach the hair too. The Mundari also drink it in the belief that cow urine infuses purity; an advice given to us too at times. They also combine urine with ashes to polish the mag-



nificent horns of the cattle.

The Mundari, tall and muscular, may "look like bodybuilders," says Zaidi, "but their diet is pretty much milk and yogurt. That's it." Other bodily fluids have more unlikely uses. Mundari men will squat under streams of cow urine, both an antiseptic, Zaidi suggests, and as an aesthetic choice – the ammonia in the urine color the Mundari's hair orange.

Before the onset of the raging civil war in Sudan, each Ankole-Watusi cattle is said to have been worth nearly \$500. This was the reference value used to calcu-



late the bride price paid to a woman's family. Following the end of the war, the number of middle-aged men in search of wives has dramatically increased. This had a direct impact as it doubled the bride price from an average of 20 cows per bride to 40. This inflation has made cattle even more precious and has led to an increased frequency of cattle raids, which could be lethal at times.

Mundari live in cattle camps; everyone is obliged to play a role and discharge a responsibility. The men lead the cows into the fields during the day and regroup them in the camp before sunset, while the women clean and prepare food for everyone; how very traditional. The children clean the ground of the camp every morning by collecting the dung and burning it at sunset. The smoke drives away mosquitoes and also creates a unique atmosphere.

The mooing cow, for the Mundari, is wealth, social security, dowry, pension, an ATM etc.; above all a bond, social and spiritual. No wonder, like the Hindus they absolutely adore and worship the cows as the most fascinating, gentle and beautiful of animals.