

## **In the Name of Cows' Rights: Sacred Cow "Mothers" and Ethnonationalism in India**

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### **Abstract**

This essay analyses the role bovine bodies play in the co-construction of social difference in India. Following the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, the phenomenon of cow protectionism and anti-beef legislation across many Indian states has added a political dimension to the long-standing cultural and economic history of cows, and hegemonic practices of vegetarianism among the majority-Hindu population. The politicisation of bovine bodies under Hindutva nationalism has had both symbolic and material implications, especially for marginalised human groups such as Muslims and lower-caste Dalits, as well as cows themselves. Drawing on feminist political ecology and material feminist approaches, this essay examines how discursive constructions of nonhuman nature, such as the sacred cow, interact with distinct material realities regarding violence and discrimination against human and bovine bodies. Moreover, it demonstrates how acts of resistance from the same minority groups can deepen the divide between humans and nonhuman animals, invisibilizing nonhuman suffering further. More broadly, this calls for a deeper examination of animal welfare claims to reveal the lived experiences and everyday impacts of human-nonhuman animal power relations.

**Keywords:** cow protectionism; feminist political ecology; human-nonhuman animal relations; India; post-humanism

*After Daksha created living beings, so the story goes, he found them clamoring for food. He therefore drank a cup of nectar (amrit) and out of his mouth came the divine cow Surabhi. She gave birth to a number of tawny daughters (kapila) who, in turn, became mothers. The cows multiplied and their milk provided food for the humans being created by Daksha. Some of the milk fell on the head of Shiva, who grew red with anger and the reflection of his color produced different colors among the cows [...]. Daksha calmed Shiva by arguing that milk, being nectar, was pure and by the present of a bull to Shiva, who henceforth became Pashupati, the lord of cattle. Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, agreed to reside in the semi-divine cows and so those who tended them were considered blessed in every way (Excerpt from the Mahabharata, In Lodrick (2005:71).*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In India, there is a long tradition of cow protectionism and a deep-rooted Hindu ethic of the "sacred cow" (Harris 1978). The above excerpt is just one among many sacred Hindu scriptures that depict the complex entanglements of religious deities, motherhood, sustenance, ritual, and wealth in Indian religious and cultural thought. Today, cattle have also taken on a political role, with the enactment of stringent cow protection legislation in most Indian states (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016), which has prohibited and criminalised the slaughter of cows and the consumption of beef. However, there are still a variety of different and conflicting beliefs and practices regarding the cow in India, which are beset by power hierarchies, social exclusion, and violence.

This paper argues that, beneath the façade, cow protectionism is incompatible with the protection of cows and animal advocacy (Narayanan 2018). What is more, there is a broader agenda, whereby Hindu "cow mothers" have become an instrument of nation-building through the mobilisation of cows' sacrality. These mandates protect Hindutva nationalism based on a pure upper-caste Hindu nation while other societal groups are marginalised (Narayanan 2019). In order to shed light on the politicisation of the cow and the phenomenon of cow protectionism, both discursive and material interactions between humans and bovines are deemed important. By considering human-human as well as human-nonhuman animal relations, this paper, therefore, poses the following research question: What role do bovine bodies play in the co-construction of social difference in India?

Cattle in India have economic, cultural, and political significance, which fuse historical roots with current consequences, and merge nature and culture. They are very much intertwined with the material realities of many different groups in India, as meta-commodities, livelihoods for many minority communities, such as Muslims and lower-caste Dalits who work in the beef and tanning industries, and women's work, through feeding, milking, and nurturing sick cows, and food processing (Shiva 2000). Moreover, in India, vegetarianism has historically been hegemonic, and beef has been stigmatised (Balmurli and Suraj 2018). This is related to the symbolic role of bovine bodies through identification with various Hindi deities. Dyaus is, for example, the bull with a thousand horns and sky god

who fertilises Prithivi, the Earth cow, leading to the creation of all other gods and creatures. The cow is thus a “supreme symbol of femininity, fecundity, and maternalism” (Shiva 2000:67), where Prithivi and the personification of the earth is depicted as a divine cow and mother of the gods.

The significance of cows in India today offers an interesting case, since, unlike in other societies where cows are meta-commodities, the politicisation of bovine bodies in the cow protection debate has resulted in religious and caste-based discrimination as well as contestation (Narayanan 2018). Moreover, according to Yamini Narayanan (2019:197), both bovine bodies and women’s bodies in India “are enmeshed as productive, reproductive, and symbolic capital in the intersections of anthropatriarchy and gendered ultranationalist Hindu patriarchy”. This paper demonstrates how feminist political ecology can illuminate discursive-material entanglements as well as exclusions in the cow protection phenomenon. While scholarship from post-structural feminist political ecology has considered the role of nature in producing social difference (Elmhirst 2015) and has engaged with the concept of intersectionality to examine the intersections between dimensions of social relationships (Nightingale 2011), this paper aims to explore human-nonhuman animal power relations more explicitly, seeking insights from material feminist scholarship that has analysed how race, ethnicity, class and age are formed and performed through a human and nonhuman divide (Birke, Bryld, and Lykke 2004; Collard 2012; Hovorka 2012). Since politicised constructions of nonhuman nature and questions of discourse interact with distinct material realities, this paper employs a post-humanist relational ontology in an attempt to overcome “human exceptionalism” (Haraway 2008). Subsequently, it analyses the “intra-actions” (Barad 2007) of human and nonhuman nature through an intersectional approach, which considers the material implications of the politicisation of cows in India for cows, women, Muslims, and Dalits.

## 2. THEORISING HUMAN/NONHUMAN CONNECTIONS

### *2.1 Feminist Political Ecology*

Emerging from the roots of both gender and development as well as political ecology (PE) research, in the mid-1990s, feminist political ecology (FPE) evolved as an approach to address social equity and justice in environmental change by drawing on power and difference from within feminist theory. The ground-breaking publication of *Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences* by Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari (1996:4) situated FPE as a subfield of PE that recognises gender as power relations, which are a “critical variable in shaping resource access and control interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape processes of ecological change”.

Within FPE, there are three broadly defined branches; structuralist, post-structuralist, and post-humanist. For the purposes of this essay, focus is placed on post-structuralist and post-humanist strands of thinking and empirical research. Post-structuralist and performative theories of subjectivity (Butler 2004) look at the contextual constitution of gender with an emphasis on fluidity. In order to emphasise a non-essentialist view of the

link between nature and women, gender is often conceptualised as “a process by which subjectivities are produced and shift over time and space” (Nightingale 2011:165). In this way, how changing environmental conditions produce categories of social disparity are highlighted through intersectional analyses of society-environment relations. FPE’s contribution, therefore, is a transformation from a narrow focus on gender, taking into consideration how people are affected via caste, gender, race, ethnicity, and other differences. An intersectional approach opens up pathways to understanding how power operates not only in two dimensions, but across multiple dimensions (Nightingale 2011).

While highlighting fluidity and change, however, poststructuralist accounts may focus too much on agency and too little on structure (Elmhirst 2015). Moreover, these approaches have also been criticised for overlooking the role of nature. Judith Butler, for example, has been instrumental in breaking down the female-male binary, but their work is critiqued by material feminist scholars for excluding lived experiences and bodily practices that interact with the nonhuman world—subsequently deemed by Karen Barad as “anthropocentric” (2007:151). While the linguistic turn in feminism and critical theory since the 1970s has foregrounded the role of language in the construction of social reality, material scholars have argued that language also interacts with material reality (Hekman 2008; Latour 2004). What is needed, therefore, are dynamic understandings of agency to “account for myriad ‘intra-actions’ between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological” (Alaimo and Hekman 2008:5).

## *2.2 Material Feminism*

Within the broader shift towards ontological concerns in the social sciences and humanities, material perspectives on gender and nature can overcome the nature/culture dualism which pits a deconstructivist understanding of gender and the materiality of nature against each other (Agarwal 1992; Barad 2007; Bauhardt 2013; Haraway 2003). Thinking with Donna Haraway’s (2003) concept of “naturecultures” is useful in dissolving the binary opposition between nature and culture and for understanding the embeddedness of human life in material *and* discursive processes. In addition, Karen Barad’s theory of ‘agential realism’ moves beyond the privileging of matter that occurs in traditional realism or the privileging of language that occurs in discursive theories to suggest the occurrence of “intra-actions” of matter and discourse (Barad 1999:96). She thus poses an idea of performativity that shares Butler’s (2011) attempt to explain how discursive practices produce material bodies, yet develops this further to also explain how discursive construction is related to non-discursive practices (Hekman 2008:105). Matter is therefore not fixed, but a doing. To overcome the binary separation of the observer and observed object, Barad (2003:804) emphasises phenomena; her notion of performativity is a “materialist, naturalist, and posthumanist elaboration that allows matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming.” In that, it is both material and discursive, and questions the human/nonhuman binary, Barad’s “post-humanist performativity” proves useful as an ontological basis to

analyse how human-nonhuman animal relationships are co-constructed through discourse, facilitating emergent phenomena.

Critical scholars positioned within this latter strand of materialist research have undertaken both theoretical and empirical research into human-nonhuman animal relations, which structure and are structured by gender, race, caste, and class (Birke et al. 2004; Doniger 2010; Hovorka 2012; Narayanan 2018). Retaining an explanation of power relations, Hovorka's (2012) gender-species intersectional approach balances discursive and material elements to empirically investigate the intersections of chickens and women, and cattle and men in Botswana. She states that:

*Certain groups of humans become symbolically associated and materially related to certain other (nonhuman) species (and vice versa)—this process, together with hierarchical privileging and othering, reproduces the positionality and life chances of both humans and nonhumans within society (2012:876).*

Such work is useful to think with when examining India's social fabric, where the boundaries between the human-nonhuman animal-divine might be blurred in certain instances. Significantly however, this may not automatically equate with emancipation.

In sum, these approaches are helpful in analysing the entanglement of meaning-making around the symbolic feminine entity of the "sacred cow" and practices of gender, caste, and religious discrimination in the phenomenon of cow protectionism. The blurring of religious symbolism, sacred motherhood, and the material realities of bovines and humans from different social groups can be benefitted by a relational ontology that retains an analysis of power across multiple dimensions. The next section moves this forward in its engagement with the phenomenon of cow protection in India.

### 3. COW MOTHERS AND ETHNONATIONALISM IN INDIA

#### *3.1 Cow Protection and the Hindu Food Hierarchy*

The politicisation of bovine sacrality occurred with the emergence of the cow protection movement during the 1880s and 1890s, when India was under British colonial rule. Popular Hindu reform movement, *Arya Samaj*, founder Dayananda Saraswati utilized cows as a political symbol to stir feelings of Indian nationalism in the face of British rule. He established the first Cow Protection Society in 1882 and his work and legacy has a strong anti-Muslim element (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016). At this time, while the symbolic language of the sacred cow was used to establish the nationalist movement and unify Hindus across caste, in reality, the cow protection movement furthered the interests of India's upper castes (Narayanan 2018), in subduing racial and ethnic differences.

Post-independence in 1947, the ethic against cow slaughter and beef consumption in India was expressed in laws prohibiting the practice of cow slaughter; this includes Article 48 of the Constitution of India:

*The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds,*

*and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle. (Das 1950:Art. 48)*

Following these requirements, laws to prohibit cow slaughter have been enacted in 22 of India's 29 states, although they vary widely. Under amended legislation from 2015, in the state of Haryana, the slaughter of cows is not permitted under any circumstances, including disease, disability, and infertility, while, in Assam, cows are permitted to be slaughtered if official certificates are granted. Punishments for slaughter and beef consumption also vary. In the state of Gujarat, for example, the punishment for cow slaughter ranges from seven years to life imprisonment, whereas some states issue fines only. Moreover, state definitions of "cattle" can be more or less inclusive; in Gujarat, cow protection does not extend to buffaloes (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016). In the states of Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, the consumption of beef is also a punishable offence.

Pre-dating the aforementioned legal manifestations of cow protection, beef-eating taboos, practices of "untouchability", and communal violence were practiced (Chigateri 2008:15). According to Shraddha Chigateri, there is a long-standing Hindu food hierarchy in India, which decreases in desirability from vegetarianism to non-beef meat-eating to beef-eating. Laced throughout this symbolic hierarchy is the taboo of beef-eating and the belief in the sacred cow, which creates a binary of those who cherish the cow and those who do not. Vegetarianism is posed as a "superior ethic" and it is interconnected with values of "non-violence" (Chigateri 2008:19-20). This can be found in Mahatma Gandhi's influential religio-spiritual ethics, depicted in a letter to Indian independence activist Asaf Ali in 1920:

*I have no right to destroy animal life if I can subsist healthily on vegetable life. I have no right to slaughter all animal life because I find it necessary to slaughter some animal life. Therefore, if I can live well on goats, fish and fowl (surely enough in all conscience) it is sin for me to destroy cows for my sustenance. And it was some such argument that decided the rishis of old in regarding the cow as sacred, especially when they found that the cow was the greatest economic asset in national life. And I see nothing wrong, immoral or sinful in offering worship to an animal so serviceable as the cow . . . cow slaughter is indefensible on moral grounds (M.K. Gandhi in Chigateri 2008).*

However, the food hierarchy positions the cow at the top, which has an impact on non-Hindu religious communities, as well as lower-caste Hindus, who engage in the production and consumption of beef—practices entangled with "impurity" (Chigateri 2008). The non-violence of vegetarianism and cow protection cannot simply be assumed, it is riddled with conflicts, contestations, and hypocrisy. This is where Barad's (2003) post-humanist performativity approach, outlined above, can help to locate the materiality of the cow in the process of meaning-making, which emerges from the nexus of human-nonhuman animal relations and various practices. Engaging with this approach, the next sections focus on the conflated role of motherhood in women and cows in Hindu patriarchy, and the othering of Muslims and Dalit communities through the sustained hierarchy of Hindu cow worship in India's Hindutva nation-building project.

### *3.2 The Instrumentalisation of Motherhood and the Sacred Cow*

While it may be true that the presence of “Earth mother myths” have declined in academic debates and international development circles more generally (Leach 2007), they remain very much present within Indian discourse to this day. As recently as 2015, at the United Nations Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, Prime Minister Modi declared in his speech: “We represent a culture that calls our planet Mother Earth. As our ancient text say: Keep Pure! For the Earth is our mother! And we are her children!” (2015). The Hindutva narrative in India includes, on the one hand, technological economic development, privatisation, and digitalisation steeped in the language of modernity. At the same time, it is flooded with the bright colours of saffron, cow worship, polytheism, vegetarianism, and female chastity (Banaji 2018).

Hindutva aims to transform India into an exclusively Hindu state by alienating minority groups (Edwards and Ramamurthy 2017). Hindu nationalism found political voice through the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang* (RSS), otherwise known as the “National self-help organisation”, established in 1925, which has been instrumental in constructing this narrative. The RSS has gained prominence since the 1920s and many former or current members hold positions of power within Indian political and civil life. The BJP and the RSS have employed various images of gods and goddesses, cow symbolism, and images of Mother India in an attempt to win voters (Brosius and Butcher 1999). An example of this fusion is the BJP’s *Incredible India* campaign, launched in 2002, to promote tourism in India. This form of nation branding highlights “global Indianness” and depicts India as what Edwards and Ramamurthy (2017:325) call a “hybrid nation, open to global capital but distinctively Hindu in nature”. Moreover, the BJP’s 2014 election campaign slogan for Prime Minister Modi was “*BJP ka sandesh, bachegi gai, bachega desh*” (BJP’s message, the cow will be saved, the country will be saved) (Puniyani 2015). Such evocations fuse a pastoral and romantic past with a scientific and rational present.

In keeping with this, is a patriarchal romanticisation of the past that backgrounds women and nature in the conception of the mothering body as a location for nationalism. According to Narayanan (2019:201), Hindu extremism is founded through “the objectification of female and feminized ‘Hindu’ bodies—whether human, bovine, or the physical and metaphorical landscape of ‘Mother India’—as mothering bodies.” In a blurring of the human/nonhuman animal divide, women and bovine Hindu bodies are mothers in both a material sense, by producing children, and of a symbolic sense, as mothers of the Hindu state, which in turn is also a mother. This embeddedness of Hindu motherhood is also deemed “patriotic motherhood” which comes with a duty to uphold and pass on Hindu values and culture, a duty which lies within the private sphere (Hansen 1994:93). The patriarchal conception of Hindu motherhood employed in cow protection debates conflates maternal and material exploitation; the cow is stripped of her biological motherhood, that is, her infants and her milk, which in Hinduism is viewed as her *dharma* or ethical duty and responsibility to give. The cow’s body is thus framed as a site of maternal care for humans, blurring the maternal and the material (Narayanan 2019:204-205). In this way, Samantha Hurn aptly describes

cows as “symbolic entities whose physiological or behavioural characteristics are consumed by human imaginations” (Hurn 2017:213).

A more concrete example where this dynamic plays out is in cow sanctuaries or *gaushalas*. In India, these are spaces for unproductive dairy cows where they can spend the rest of their natural lives; they are regarded as some of the oldest spaces of animal welfarism and the humane use of animals in India. Narayanan (2019:208) highlights the interconnectedness of the symbolic and the material in her empirical fieldwork with managers, workers, and priests of almost 50 *gaushalas* across India. In these discussions, she outlines the sanctification of milk as not just food but “sanctified food.” Echoing the “hypocrisy of the food hierarchy” (Chigateri 2008:22), one man she spoke with at the Carterpuri Gaushala in Gurgaon said:

I drink a big glass of milk morning and evening, I like it; these cows are like my mothers. I come every weekend to feed them. No, cow milk is not causing any harm to the cows, it’s all these people wanting beef; beef is the issue. Milk is fine, for us milk is not only food, as Hindus we give it even more respect and use it for sweets and prasad [sanctified offering] (interview in Narayanan 2019:208).

In the sanctified ingestion of both a tangible liquid and an intangible idea, the whole passage frames a dichotomy, while perpetuating a hierarchy, between Hindus as caring, and beef-eating Muslims as harmful. This is further exposed in instrumentalization of bovine motherhood and cows’ reproductive capacities serving Hindu patriarchy by claiming women and cows require protection from endangerment and victimisation by Muslim men and denies them agency as self-governing subjects (Subramaniam 2014:76). Patriarchal Hindu hierarchies are therefore sustained by the reproductive labour of female bovines and their milk products, as well as distinguishing between those who eat cows, and those who do not.

Recent displays of resistance reveal contradictions in the symbolic “twinning” (Doniger 2010: 200) of women and bovines within material reality. In 2017, Sujatro Ghosh, a photographer based in New Delhi, created a project which depicts women wearing cow masks to claim that cattle are more important in India than women. Although gendered crimes of sexual violence and rape continue to be widespread and court cases go on for years, he asserts that “when a cow is slaughtered, Hindu extremist groups immediately go and kill or beat up whoever is suspect of slaughter” (Pandey 2017). While well-intentioned, Narayanan (2019:214) highlights that this representation positions the interests of women and cows as oppositional to each other and “invisibilizes the violence perpetrated by humans against nonhumans.” This further segments the human-nonhuman animal divide as well as the gulf between human social groups.

Obscuring nonhuman violence is especially significant since sites of cow protection do not necessarily lead to the material emancipation of cows. This is the result of a narrow conception of what constitutes violence within cow slaughter, as well as a shield of bovine sacrality that is symbolic. The “humane” treatment of cows in these spaces is rendered humane through their lack of slaughter and their worship, while ignoring other forms of



violence, such as forced impregnation and separation from their young (Narayanan 2019:206). What is more, in many cases, they are left to starve to death due to an insufficient capacity to house and feed abandoned ex-dairying animals. Therefore, cow protection seeks *only* to abolish cow slaughter while ignoring other forms of violence, in which bovine motherhood is exploited, her milk commodified, and her reproductive labour extracted under her “dharmic duty” (Narayanan 2019:207).

Thus, *gaushalas*, as supposed sites of animal welfarism, in fact provide a base for Hindutva politics through the conflation of the “biological, cultural, and material roles of the cow as mother” (Narayanan 2019:204). The shield of sacrality and symbolic protection ignores material implications across other levels of violence against female bodies, both human and nonhuman. In addition to the fact that these spaces often do not provide protection for bovines themselves, the political instrumentalisation of the cow as a Hindu mother has also been used as a way of sustaining “graded hierarchies” in India’s identity politics (Chigateri 2008:32). The next section explores the question of who or which groups bovine bodies are really being protected from.

### *3.3 The Sacred Cow and the Othering of Minority Communities*

Despite the ethic of “non-violence” and sacred protection of the cow mother upon which the cow protection movement has been established, the politico-religious mobilisation of Hindus against both Dalits and Muslims has resulted in the increasingly violent marginalisation of these minority groups, whose livelihoods rely on the tanning and beef industries. It should also be noted that while violence of this kind against women is seldom documented, women make up roughly 30 percent of the 2.5 million workers in the leather industry, and are more likely to be employed as homeworkers, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation (Hoefe 2017).

From a historical perspective, the cow has come to hold a salient role in the conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India, where Hindus are defined as “cow protectors” and Muslims as “cow killers” (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016:334). Antony Parel argued that Muslims interpreted the symbolic significance of cows in Hinduism as “a pretext for the oppression of Muslims and a deliberate tool to interfere in the Muslim festival of Kurbanī” (Parel 1969: 188). Kurbanī is a sacrificial tradition where, in India, many Muslims offer cows, which they consider their most valuable livestock, as indication of their devotion to God. In this way, cow protectionism is defined in oppositional terms and poses a threat to Islamic religious practices and livelihoods (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016).

Today, beef bans materially impact Muslims through violent extremism posed by cow protection vigilantes. A prominent event in September 2015 involved the murder of a 50-year-old Muslim man named Mohammad Akhlaq, from the village of Dadri in Uttar Pradesh, by a mob who alleged he and his family had eaten beef. The justification provided by one of the accused in a 2017 interview depicts the interconnection between the protection of nature and motherhood when exclaiming: “We did everything to protect the mother cow” (Kumar 2017). This incident is far from spontaneous, as found by a data journalism

organisation IndiaSpend, which started tracking hate crimes reported in the media in 2010. Since 2010, 86 percent of those lynched by Hindu *gaurakshaks* (cow protectors) have been toward Muslims and 97 percent of the attacks occurred after 2014 (Parakh 2017). Since the BJP came to power in 2014, cow vigilantism has risen, with 76 incidents of hate crimes occurring between 2014 and 2017 (Saldanha 2017). The symbol of the cow then, is used as a tool to mobilise rural masses as evidenced by a new category of violence, termed “bovine-related mob lynching deaths” (Baksi and Nagarajan 2017). Such events led Indian politician Shashi Tharoor to claim in 2015, that a “cow is safer in India than a Muslim” (Times 2015).

Moreover, caste-based violence from within the Hindu community dispels any claims that cow protectionism is an attempt to mitigate social inequalities among Hindus, as was the discourse of the early cow protection movement. For example, in the state of Gujarat, four Dalit men were stripped, tethered to a car, and publicly flogged by *gaurakshaks* for skinning a dead cow. India’s Dalit community is traditionally responsible for disposing of animal carcasses (Prabhu 2016), which entangles cow politics with caste labour (Adcock and Govindrajan 2019). The incident sparked what turned into violent protests against the treatment of Dalits. Dalits in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat ceased removal of cow carcasses from the streets and fields, and some protestors dumped bovine carcasses in front of government offices. One tweet at the time exclaimed: “Your mother, you perform the funeral rites” (Pullanoor 2016). These events demonstrate that bovine bodies are not just sites of violence, but also landscapes for Dalit resistance against Hindutva identity, which posits the holy cow as their mother. Moreover, beef bans have elsewhere been resisted through “beef festivals” organised by both Dalit and non-Dalit supporters across India. By eating “transgressive foods” (Sathyamala 2019:880), Dalits are challenging the Hindu food hierarchy by performing a culinary counter-culture. Despite advancing minority rights, as is similar in the case of Ghosh’s photography project, this, however, positions casteised groups against specific animal species, thus both deepening the human-nonhuman animal divide and ignoring the material aspects of animal liberation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Using a feminist post-humanist approach (Barad 2007; Alaimo and Hekman 2008), this paper analyses the role bovine bodies play in the co-construction of social difference in India to highlight forms of discrimination and violence that undermine animal advocacy and social justice of minority groups. The theoretical framework demonstrates how post-structuralist FPE approaches have been useful in examining the discursive role of nature in producing social difference, yet they do not account for the intra-actions of politicised constructions of nature with material realities. By shedding light on lived experiences and bodily practices that interact with the nonhuman world (Barad 2007), insights from material feminism can illuminate the intra-actions between material and discursive phenomena (Alaimo and Hekman 2008). Subsequently, this enables a more explicit investigation of human-nature

power relations through intersectional performances, to capture the everyday impacts of the politicisation of cows in India, for cows, women, Muslims, and Dalits.

Analysis of the intra-actions of discourse and reality at the intersections of gender, religion, and caste reveal a dissonance between symbolic prophecies of the sacred cow and material oppression of various minority groups, even those the cow protection movement seeks to protect. While discourse in relation to gender and mothering is found to be prevalent in the justification for cow protection, the effects thereof are less convincing. First, when looking at the role of patriotic motherhood, the narrow conception of violence, in this case, cow slaughter, ignores other forms of violence against cows, and neglects the reproductive nature of cows. Female cows, in fact, often suffer from violence and oppression through a conflation of the symbolic and material (re)productive value of bovine bodies and their products (Narayanan 2019).

Moreover, in addition to the failure of cow protection, symbolic bovine sacrality acts as a cover under which patriarchal Hindutva narratives and practices have been used to marginalise other minority groups, such as Muslim and Dalits, in India's Brahmanical nation-building project. The material reality of caste-based violence dispels symbolic claims from the RSS and BJP that Hindutva represents all Hindus, including Dalits (Sarkar and Sarkar 2016:349). Bovine bodies have been used as a political tool, mobilised by right-wing Hindu political groups to "build an ideologically 'pure' Hindu nation, constructing cow slaughter as a direct attack on Hindu nationhood and identity" (Narayanan 2018:331); this has material implications, resulting in discrimination and mob violence against Dalit and Muslim communities, who depend on the tanning and beef industries for their livelihoods.

Instances of provocation and resistance from minority groups, such as Ghosh's viral photography project concerning a dualistic conception of women and cattle, the corpse dumping events in Gujarat, and beef festivals concerning Dalits and bovine bodies, are at first an indication of human agency against dominant social groups. However, when considered within the wider intersectional framework of both human and nonhuman agency employing Barad's post-humanist performativity approach, such acts present the danger of invisibilising nonhuman suffering and creating deeper divisions between humans and nonhuman nature. In the future, this approach could help to highlight human-animal division in opposition to cow protectionism and the politicisation of animals more broadly in order to move towards post-human liberation.

Cow protectionism and beef bans are not a new phenomenon, but the election of the BJP in 2014 and again in 2019 has connected bovine politics with violence against minority communities. With increasing Hindu-nationalist sentiment, the rights of cows on the grounds of animal welfare is an evocation with a much broader goal, a goal to elevate patriarchal, Brahmanical, nation-protecting Hindu practices while disregarding the material realities and livelihoods of India's Muslim and Dalit communities. Thus, bovine bodies become sites of violence and resistance between both human and nonhuman groups. Rather than a unitary symbol, cow mothers provide a divisive and hierarchical landscape for India's ethnonationalist project, all in the name of cows' rights.

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