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While much has been written about the sanctity of the cow in Hinduism, *Mother Cow, Mother India* is one of the first to question what this special position meant to the welfare of bovines in India. In an unremittingly bleak portrayal of their torturous and often brief lives, Yamini Narayanan demonstrates that the religious reverence of the cow did not preclude their exploitation as a source of nutrition for humans. India is a leading global producer in dairy, a form of exploitation that is often perceived as benign because it preserves the life of the cow while divesting it of the so-called excess milk that was left unconsumed by its young. A crucial insight in this ground-breaking ethnography is that the dairy industry and the beef industry are links in a supply chain leading toward slaughter. In the author’s words, “It is impossible to be the world’s largest dairy farm without being among the world’s biggest bovine slaughterhouses. It is impossible to sustain dairying, an industry which requires continuously impregnating and breeding ever larger numbers of animals, without slaughtering the ‘useless’ males and ‘spent’ females” (p. 41). The absence of an industry dedicated to the production of beef obscures the quotidian death and debasement of bovines in India, creating what Narayanan refers to as “thick confusion or ataxia around seeing the animal, and particularly, seeing the violence done to an animal held up to godliness ... and positioned as a lauded nation-building resource” (p. 63).

Narayanan’s observation on animal violence occurring in our blind spot recalls Timothy Pachirat’s *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (2011), a study on cow slaughterhouses in the United States engaging in what Pachirat calls a “politics of sight” where repugnant practices of slaughter can be normalized if they operate under conditions of distance and concealment. *Mother Cow, Mother India* similarly indexes a global phenomenon of industrial-scale killing of other species but further adds a new dimension to strategies of diminishing sight for political ends. India’s dairy industry, in collaboration with a spectrum of religious and nationalist actors, conceals through misdirection by
installing the figure of the sacred cow in the foreground, obscuring the mass animal death that takes place offstage. Even as a significant fraction of Hindutva ideologues valorizes the cow as a mother to humans through its provision of milk for mass human consumption, they sanction the process of extracting that milk, which entails the deaths of not only male calves and old females but also varieties perceived as foreign and thus unworthy of reverence, such as a Holstein, the Friesian, and the Jersey cow. Further, smallholder dairy farms and temple sanctuaries surreptitiously outsource cow slaughter to Muslim and Dalit communities, but the act of killing itself is then weaponized to oppress and demean these groups. In effect, public, willfully blind disregard for the welfare of bovines is a global issue, but the dual oppressions that emerged in India is an outcome of local politics that seek to revere the idea of the cow as a way to assert the worth of some groups—human and nonhuman—over others.

Both Hindutva ideology and the intensification of cow slaughter in India are distinctly modern phenomena. The book sees both trends as reactions to British colonization of the subcontinent. Hindutva is an ideology that should be distinguished from the ancient religion of Hinduism, through its contemporary philosophy of centering the Hindu in an Indian nation-state and its origins traced to the anti-colonial Hindu nationalisms of the colonial period with formation of a major political party, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, in 1925. Following closely, in the 1930s and 1940s, the tools and motivations to intensify milk production surfaced in tandem with secular nationalism with such leaders as Gandhi perceiving the cow as a unifying symbol and potential nourisher of a needful population. The development of India’s dairying industry was patterned on that of developed nations. This is persuasively shown in an early chapter in the book describing how scientific breeding was carried out locally, facilitated by technologies of artificial insemination and embryo transfer that produced India’s own version of the “super-ovulating cow” whose pregnancies and forcible separation from their young was essential to the success of the enterprise (p. 97).

Narayanan pays due attention to the global capitalization of animals, applying concepts unpacked in Nicole Shukin’s Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times (2009). However, Narayanan’s monograph is much more powerful when it is critiquing India’s intersecting oppression of bovines and humans and the sociopolitical conditions that made these inter-species subjugations possible. The focus of the book remains resolutely on the cow, and the picture of their lives that emerges is profoundly disturbing. In vivid and powerful prose, Narayanan takes readers through the cruel milking process that left cow mothers bereft of their children and to ineffectual protective spaces, such as cow sanctuaries (gaushalas) in temples where love for the cow was channeled into forcing the animal into “a non-consensual maternal relationship with the human” (p. 165). The book’s ethnography goes on to track the underbelly of the trade: the working lives of cow vigilantes (gaurakshaks) who rescue cows illegally transported to slaughter and, conversely, the lives of cow smugglers and workers in slaughterhouses. This is a comprehensive examination of each link in the dairy industry’s production. The sites under study—cattle markets, smallholder dairy farms, temples, breeding labs, roadsides where abandoned cows and cattle roam, sanctuaries run by animal protection associations—show how deeply the cow is embedded in the fabric of everyday life in India. Therefore, the book has much to offer if used in class discussions on animal welfare, rights, and multispecies justice. Moreover, its focus on the domestic complements the emphasis on the wild in South Asian animal studies. In the anthropological literature, big cats have received the most attention, for instance, in Nayanika Mathur’s Crooked Cats: Beastly Encounters in the Anthropocene (2021) and Shafqat Hussein’s The Snow Leopard and the Goat: Politics of Conservation in
the Western Himalayas (2020). Pairing this book with these recent works may enable a useful classroom comparison between how domesticated animals and wild animals simultaneously are central to and challenge the values of a modern nation-state.

The final chapter of this book, promising a discussion on post-dairy futures, is one that readers looking for a way to step back from being complicit in cow slaughter would look forward to. However, in some ways, this chapter is the most disappointing, especially for readers less interested in India’s politics and more interested in the ethics of consuming dairy. Much of the chapter remains critique-centered rather than solution-centered with much space dedicated to criticizing reactionary movements to eat beef in solidarity with oppressed Dalits and Muslims—initiatives that the author rightfully criticizes as not only unhelpful to the welfare of the cow itself but also retaining their willful blindness to the animal’s plight. The answer offered in response—veganism—may come across as intuitive yet idealistic, especially since the vegan movement would have to take off at a huge scale in a country that does not have the requisite motivation or infrastructure to facilitate such a transition. The difficulties of such a transition perhaps parallels and exceeds that of the energy transition toward renewables as consuming dairy and beef requires inculcating an empathy for the nonhuman in societies that are primed not to care. Narayanan’s ethnography is an important and unsettling addition to a growing body of work that documents a pressing need to change this state of affairs.

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