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THE COW, CASTE AND CONTEMPORARY ART IN INDIA: AESTHETIC ECOLOGIES AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, titled 'The Cow, Caste and Contemporary Art in India: Aesthetic Ecologies and Social Hierarchies in the Twenty-First Century', submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy to the University of Edinburgh, is my original work. No part of the research presented here has been submitted for a degree or examination at any other university. References, help and material obtained from other sources have been duly acknowledged.

I hereby confirm the originality of the work in this thesis. I also confirm that there is no plagiarism in any part of this thesis.

Anisha Palat
April 2024

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to understand the interaction between the cow, caste, and contemporary art in twenty-first-century India. The cow is a highly contentious animal in India, largely due to its links with politics and religion. Particularly, the religious and political nature of the cow is associated with upper caste Hinduism where it is framed as a divine mother figure. Violence 'in the name of the cow' often takes place against those who do not subscribe to this framing of the cow, like members of the Dalit community who engage with the cow as animal as a source of beef and labour. Overall, it appears as though it is the cow, in its image, that is most visible in Indian society and culture, as opposed to the cow as an animal. The violence that takes place against Dalits, for instance, is in the name of the cow-as-image. This suggests that the cow's animal nature or animality (cow-as-animal) is often superseded by its divine image (cow-as-image).

By focusing on four contemporary artists from India and the diaspora who identify as Dalit—G. Chandru (b.1951), Sajan Mani (b.1981), Siddhesh Gautam (b.1991), and Kirtika Kain (b.1990)—this thesis considers the extent to which these artists attempt to disengage from the normative religious and political associations of the cow in India. The artists are presented here as disrupting and unsettling long-established social hierarchies and power structures of caste in relation to the cow. The thesis uses caste studies and animal studies as an approach to consider the artists' varying interventions and disruptions. Chandru's painted cows demonstrate that even in attempts to highlight the cow's animality, it is its divine image that most often dominates perceptions. Sajan Mani's performances as the cow highlight themes of food, labour, and the art world in relation to caste discrimination, using the cow-as-image and cow-as-animal to underscore these conceptions. The digital cow that Siddhesh Gautam illustrates on social media shows that the hegemonic upper caste associations of the cow can be disrupted and underlined by employing tools like satire and cartooning. Finally, Kirtika Kain

shows that the material presence of the cow, especially cow dung, can represent a personal and collective narrative rooted in diasporic histories and experiences of caste and thus separate from its normative religious associations. Ultimately, the thesis argues that bringing together the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal helps to critique and challenge social hierarchies like caste. Such a bringing together of the animal and the image is a merging of aesthetic ecologies and social hierarchies which aspire to dismantle systems of oppression.

LAY SUMMARY

Academic studies of the cow have a long history in India, rooted in disciplines like anthropology, sociology, religious studies and economics. Overall, the cow's links within these disciplines are to religion and politics. The religious links are especially tied to an upper caste Hinduism that discriminates against those who do not engage with the cow as a religious subject. This discrimination is targeted toward members of communities like Dalits who are seen engaging with the cow in its death through beef and labour.

This thesis focuses on four contemporary artists from India and the diaspora who engage with the cow in relation to caste and disrupt the hegemonic upper caste Hinduism usually linked to the cow. All four artists are from the Dalit community and highlight varying experiences of their own associations to the cow, underscoring a complex and layered experience of the cow and caste within the Indian framework.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has evolved and changed shape over the last four years. Its navigation was especially made possible by many individuals who helped build my interest and passion for art history and its connected disciplines.

LIST OF FIGURES

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In this thesis, I have opted to use words in Indian languages without diacritics. The words appear in italics, unless used repeatedly. The explanation of the word in English is included alongside the word at first mention.

The naming convention that has been used for names with an Indian origin also does not use diacritics. These names are not italicised and are used similarly to English names. Some examples are: Kamadhenu, Shiva, and Lakshmi.

The mention of Indian cities in the thesis uses the name corresponding to the historical period being discussed. For example, Chennai used to be Madras. I refer to both depending on the historical period.

INTRODUCTION

though you are sacred, you are not beloved

thrusting your nose into city garbage

unembarrassed, a fly-blown beggar

driven from the dusty villages

how do you stand it, cow?

('Cow', originally titled 'Gomata', by Rukmini Bhaya Nair) [1]

Who are you to speak of animals—you

who have no humanity, no civilization?

('Beef, Our Life' by Gogu Shyamala) [2]

In November 2015, at the Jaipur Art Summit in India, a Styrofoam cow was seen suspended on a blue balloon against the sky. This life-size white figure of a cow against a clear blue sky was in fact an art installation titled *Bovine Divine* (2015) (see Fig.0.1) by Siddhartha Kararwal. Through his work, Kararwal intended to highlight that an increasing number of cows were dying from ingesting plastic. The installation was meant as a comment on the issue of waste toxicity in cows, who were dying in large numbers due to their eating plastic and other waste at landfills. Soon after the installation was put up, the police arrived at the scene and removed the cow, stating that this work caused hurtful sentiments on religious grounds. Furthermore, the artist was repeatedly asked if the cow was meant to be dead or alive, as a suspended 'dead' cow appeared extremely problematic to the police. Once the cow had been brought down from the sky, a *puja* or ritual of worship was performed, after which the cow was garlanded (see

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[1] Rukmini Bhaya Nair, 'Rukmini Bhaya Nair: Cow and Three New Poems', *The Punch Magazine*, 31 January 2021, https://thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/poetry/rukmini-bhaya-nair-cow-and-three-new-poems. This extract is from *The Ayodhya Cantos* (1999).
[2] Gogu Shyamala, 'Beef, Our Life/ by Gogu Shyamala', *Anveshi* (blog), 10 May 2013, https://www.anveshi.org.in/beef-our-life-by-gogu-shyamala/.

[Fig.0.2](#)). Kararwal expressed shock that his art installation was viewed on the grounds of religiosity when he had meant to highlight an ecological issue for animals.[3]

The response by the police to *Bovine Divine* underlines that the cow is primarily considered a religious subject in India. The immediate cause for worry at the figure of a cow being suspended in the air as apparently 'dead' (even though it is made of Styrofoam) shows that the cow, in its death, is controversial. Furthermore, the police pre-empted an inflamed reaction from those viewing this suspended cow. The police response not only mirrored the reaction of a public posited as significantly upper caste Hindu, but also showed that the police believed themselves to be the authorities that protected the public from their own social conditioning. Here, I draw a parallel with William Mazzarella's ideas about censorship and the public.[4] Mazzarella views censorship as the management of public speech through state intervention, premised on the idea that the 'public', always undefined, is susceptible to the force and power of images construed as potent, sacred, and obscene. The same public is sometimes prone to excessive and extreme responses and 'censorship is necessary in order to protect these illiterate unfortunates from their own worst instincts'.[5] A clear relationship emerges between censorship as the management of public speech and the image of the cow as sacred and inflammatory. The response of the police to *Bovine Divine* indicates that a sensitivity to the cow in its image is necessary to protect the worst instincts of the public. These instincts, pre-empted by the police, often involve a violence *in the name of the cow* against those who are not upper caste Hindu; this is indicative of the way the cow is perceived in India as a figure of worship, reverence, and divinity within a Hindu religious framework. The

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[3] Scroll Staff, '"Why Fly a Dead Cow?": Police Remove Plastic Cow Installation and Detain Two Artists in Jaipur', *Scroll*, accessed 23 January 2023, http://scroll.in/article/770888/why-fly-a-dead-cow-police-remove-plastic-cow-installation-and-detain-two-artists-in-jaipur

[4] William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Duke University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822397328.

[5] Mazzarella, *Censorium*, 15.

garlanding and *puja* performed on the cow, even in its Styrofoam embodiment, indicates that the cow's role in relation to Hinduism often supersedes its animality.

The cow is part of a cosmology of Hindu religious beliefs and practices that have been increasingly integrated into Indian public culture, politics, and society. As the fuss around Kararwal's installation illustrates poignantly, the cow incites particular responses from people who primarily consider the cow as religious and divine within a Hindu framing. In particular, the cow functions as an 'image' and it is this cow-as-image that provokes often virulent responses among those who perceive the cow within its Hindu framing. However, in its function as an image, the animal nature or animality of the cow is often diminished; this places the cow in its animality (cow-as-animal) in opposition to the cow in its image (cow-as-image). Taking its cue from the public response to *Bovine Divine,* this thesis aims to understand the interaction between the image of the cow, caste and contemporary art in twenty-first-century India. The thesis examines the way in which artists disengage from and disrupt the normative religious and political associations of the cow in India within these fields. In the thesis, I approach this disruption using a broad framework of caste studies and animal studies. The thesis proposes that an approach to these kinds of artworks requires to be situated within the disciplines of caste studies *and* animal studies in order to read and conceptualise the works of these artists. Such an analytical framework allows an approach to understanding how artists play on the gap between the cow-as-image and cow-as-animal. Through their play on this gap, the artists disrupt the hegemonic and upper caste equation of the cow, exposing a caste invisibility and exclusionary ideology that most often underlies this equation. The case studies presented link art and art practice to the cow, particularly in the wider context of the cow's image and animality in relation to caste, ultimately bringing together the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal in order to critique and challenge systems of hierarchical oppression like caste.

To fully understand the layered symbolism of the cow (explored in detail in Chapter One), some contextualisation is required. To this end, I first situate the entire thesis within the context of its recurring themes, and some key terms used throughout the thesis are outlined. Second, a history of modernism in Indian art is briefly outlined to contextualise caste in the history of Indian art. Third, the thesis discusses the larger field of animal studies to show relationships between human and cow. Lastly, the rationale behind my method is set out, highlighting that my method has been instrumental to shaping the argument in this thesis. This is followed by an outline of the thesis chapters.

Situating the Study and Terminology Used

The key idea that connects the many strands of this thesis is the cow. It is generally understood that the cow is a bovine mammal, predominantly and selectively bred and domesticated by humans. The modern cow, associated with dairy production, meat and agriculture, stems from this domestication and is a constructed image. However, the cow in India, while significant in the dairy, meat, and agriculture industries, is primarily seen as a religious and sacred animal. The religious and sacred nature of the cow is largely linked to the Hindu religion, particularly an upper caste sect of Hinduism (this will be elaborated in Chapter One).

Since this thesis explores many parts that include the cow, caste, and animal studies, and spans disciplines (primarily art history and anthropology), an initial summary of some key terms would help situate the wider aim of this project. All terms stem from intellectual and philosophical genealogies and practices; by using certain terms, I do not wish to tie myself to a single approach. My choice of certain terms for this thesis has been developed after careful deliberation and relates to the particular contexts of this thesis as well as its central arguments.

The idea of aesthetic ecologies is a central theme and concept in this thesis. A primary understanding of aesthetic ecologies, put simply, is in reference to the aesthetics of the

environment. For this thesis, the environment pertains to the animal nature or the animality of the cow. However, in this thesis, I do not examine whether these artworks and artists contribute or respond to the global environmental or climate crisis in relation to the cow. Terms like eco-aesthetics, political ecology, social ecology, and geo-aesthetics have contributed widely to the field of art history and the emerging field of art history discourse in relation to the environment and in turn, art and the climate crisis.[6] The terms have illustrated that there is a crucial exchange of ideas between the ecological and the aesthetic. In the thesis, I acknowledge this exchange of ideas but move beyond this exchange to suggest also that the art examined here is an expanded field. The artworks in this thesis are not a response to the cow in its animal form (cow-as-animal), but a response to the cow mobilised by social and political groups (cow-as-image) in the present moment, emerging from a history of this cow-as-image. The interaction with ecology (the animal nature of the cow) by artists enables a disruption of the social hierarchies of caste and extends to discussions of caste that include ideas of leather, waste, food, labour, politics and material.

Social hierarchies most obviously link to caste, but here I extend these hierarchies to also include the hierarchy between human and cow. Anthropocentricism usually places humans above the animal. However, in India, the cow is placed above the human; as I will illustrate later, this relates to the cow-as-image in relation to the cow-as-animal as binaries. In situating contemporary art within the frameworks of social hierarchies and aesthetic ecologies, the artists studied in this thesis challenge and critically engage with hegemony and upper caste associations of the cow in relation to caste. By placing their work in relation to the social

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[6] In India, this has resulted in scholarship like Sugata Ray's *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion* (2019), a MARG special issue titled *Art & Ecology* (March 2020), Sria Chatterjee's Climate & Colonialism Project at the Paul Mellon Centre, London, and forthcoming publications like *Ecologies, Aesthetics, and Histories of Art* (eds. Hannah Baader, Gerhard Wolf and Sugata Ray, expected October 2023), to name a few.

hierarchies of caste and aesthetic ecologies of the cow, I illustrate how they aspire to dismantle systems of oppression like caste in and through their artwork.

The reference to upper caste, mentioned above, implies a hierarchical system. This hierarchical system is the centuries-old caste system in India, which divides people along the lines of their caste or *varna*.[7] Then, *Chaturvarna* (four caste stratifications) alludes to the four groups in the caste order: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (labourers and service providers). Dalits, formerly 'untouchables', are considered outside the *Chaturvarna* system. In this thesis, I use the phrase 'upper caste' to suggest a system of privilege that has excluded Dalits.

The origins of the caste system and the ostracisation of Dalits is commonly traced to the Manusmriti, a codification of laws for social regulation in ancient India. The Manusmriti's origins are often traced across a range of centuries from 1500 BCE to 200 CE. Echoes of the Manusmriti are seen in other earlier religious Hindu texts like the Vedas and the Purushasukta which also speak of caste stratification.

As mentioned above, Dalits lie outside of the *Chaturvarna* system, thereby existing outside of the four castes. *Dalit* translates as *broken people*. The semantics of the term itself are rife with oppression and resistance. The term was first used by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, an anti-caste social reformer, who used it to describe untouchables and the oppressed. The term really gained popularity in the 1970s due to the Dalit Panthers, an anti-caste organisation that was founded in Bombay and took inspiration from the Black Panther Party in the United

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[7] See G. N. Devy, 'Varna and Jati: Consolidation of Social Hierarchy', in *The Indians: Histories of a Civilization*, ed. G. N. Devy, Tony Joseph, and Ravi Korisettar (India: Aleph Book Company, 2023), 116–20, for a discussion on *jati.* I am not discussing *jati* in detail here. *Jati* became the main principle for segregation in society between the eighth and eighteenth centuries. According to Devy, *jati* was 'an expression of difference in terms of language, region, occupation, cultivation practices, food habits, and skills'. *Varnas* often had sub-sects and *jatis,* making the entire system of caste and social stratification extremely complex.

States.[8] Prior to this, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (henceforth referred to as Ambedkar), an eminent politician, leader of and for the Dalits, and Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, used Dalit as a 'quasi-class' term. He preferred other terms for the Dalit community that highlighted the difference between 'touchables and untouchables'.[9] Mahatma Gandhi popularly called Dalits *Harijans* or *People of God* to promote acceptance of Dalits by Hindus by including them within the framework of the Hindu religion as 'people of god'. Ambedkar refuted this term for he felt that Hinduism had rejected the Dalits.[10]

Dalits, once considered 'untouchable', now fall under the bracket of Scheduled Castes.[11] The Scheduled Castes (SC) were an official category implemented by the colonial state in 1935. The term Scheduled Caste was coined when the British classified all castes considered 'untouchable' in a schedule. The Scheduled Castes constitute Dalits and ex-untouchable populations of Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. Those who were previously Hindu Dalits but have converted to Christianity or Islam do not fall in the same category. This has proved to be a matter of contention for those who are Dalit Muslims and Christians. They are not accorded the same legal benefits that are accorded to Dalit Hindus.[12] An Indian minister declared at a meeting in Kerala, 'We won't accord scheduled caste status to those who have converted. Reservation was provided to Hindu Dalits to uplift them socially and economically

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[8] See Suraj Yengde, 'The Harvest of Casteism: Race, Caste and What It Will Take to Make Dalit Lives Matter', *The Caravan*, 3 July 2020, https://caravanmagazine.in/essay/race-caste-and-what-it-will-take-to-make-dalit-lives-matter.The Dalit Panthers' definition of Dalit includes not only the oppressed castes but also the Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes. This is part of their pledge to socialism but the Panthers' inclusion of gender and religious identity-based oppression challenged the usual socialist idea based on class.

[9] See Yengde, 'The Harvest of Casteism' for a comprehensive overview of the term 'Dalit' and the rise of the Dalit Panthers; see Anand Teltumbde, *Dalits: Past, Present and Future*, Second edition (London, UK ; New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2020) for an understanding of the specific undercurrents of the term and also the demographics of caste.

[10] See B R Ambedkar. *The Annihilation of Caste*. Columbia University, http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/readings/aoc_print_2004.pdf

[11] See Teltumbde, *Dalits: Past, Present and Future*; see Bhasha Singh, 'Excluded From The Excluded | Outlook India Magazine', *Https://Magazine.Outlookindia.Com/*, 18 April 2016, https://magazine.outlookindia.com/story/excluded-from-the-excluded/296956.

[12] An example of such a legal benefit is reservation: seats are reserved in public universities for those who fall under the category of Scheduled Castes.

from the effects of untouchability. But untouchability does not exist in Christian and Muslim communities. So those who converted to these religions should not be granted SC status'.[13] However, 'caste discrimination is everywhere; it is in the genes of our Indian society. Whichever religion we go to, we are deemed to be Dalits,' says the Convenor of the National Council of Dalit Christians, showing that caste hierarchies are a problem in religions other than Hinduism as well.[14] The governments in India have been consistently denying constitutional benefits to Dalit Christians and Muslims, claiming that this would weaken Hinduism in India. In this thesis, the four artists disrupt notions of caste primarily in relation to Hinduism, but it is important to note that caste extends across religions and permeates Indian society, and that caste oppression takes place across religious boundaries.[15]

The links between Hinduism and caste are described extensively by Ambedkar in his work: overall, he suggests that while caste is a sacred institution in Hinduism, it is a social practice for other religions. Hinduism, then, remains the only religion in which caste becomes a virtue. Ambedkar maintains that to truly annihilate caste, Hinduism as a religion as well as its sacred books (like the Shastras which are similar to the Vedas) would require to be destroyed. According to him, the issue is not caste itself but a deeply religious mindset of the people: 'the real remedy is to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras… to permit the people to believe in their sanctity and their sanctions, and then to blame the people and to criticise them for their acts as being irrational and inhuman—is an incongruous way of carrying

[13] Bhasha Singh, 'Excluded From The Excluded | Outlook India Magazine', *Https://Magazine.Outlookindia.Com/*, 18 April 2016, https://magazine.outlookindia.com/story/excluded-from-the-excluded/296956.

[14] Singh, 'Excluded From The Excluded | Outlook India Magazine'.

[15] See Sumeet Samos, 'SC Status: Negating Intersectionality of Religion & Caste Isn't the Way Forward', TheQuint, 12 July 2023, https://www.thequint.com/opinion/sc-status-negating-intersectionality-of-religion-caste-isnt-the-way-forward for a detailed discussion on the status of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in relation to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.

on social reform'.[16] Eventually, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956, and led a mass

conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in order to leave the caste hierarchies of Hinduism.[17]

Ambedkar's linking of the roots of caste to Hinduism also includes the relationship of

caste to the cow. Historically, Dalits were often left the rotting carcass of the cow to consume

as food. This led to discrimination against Dalits because of this 'impure' association.

Ambedkar argues that:

> around the fourth century, Brahmanism countered Buddhism's democratic and
> egalitarian appeal by appropriating its message of ahimsa. The cow became the central
> figure in this appropriation. Whereas cows were earlier sacrificed because they were
> sacred, now the sacredness became an excuse for their protection. However, because
> there were people who lived outside the village, as "Broken Men," who had the duty of
> collecting cow carcasses and eating their meat, they became figures of scorn. Their
> degraded position, compounded by their poverty, forced them to consume leftover
> meat, resulting in the creation of a new form of discrimination: untouchability.
> According to Ambedkar, these Broken Men were Buddhists—not practising bhikkus,
> but people whose local idols and spirits had been incorporated into the Buddhist
> pantheon by travelling monks. Although a majority of castes ate meat, it was the
> compounded effect of the above factors, chief among which was the continued
> consumption of cow carcasses even when the rest of the culture had moved away from
> it, that resulted in the Broken Men's ostracism and the birth of a new category of
> oppression. This can perhaps explain why the different castes that eat pig, sheep, goat,
> chicken or fowl did not form any bond of solidarity with them.[18]

Ambedkar's views on beef, caste and the cow are situated within a history of the cow in India.

This engagement with Ambedkar's views on the cow is elucidated in an article titled 'Freedom

to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right' (2019) by Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd. Shepherd

further relates Ambedkar's views to caste atrocities and food politics. The article highlights the

way in which the contemporary field of cow politics in India is related to an upper caste

oppression of those who engage with the cow for food (beef). The article also engages with

scholarship on the cow like D. N. Jha's *Myth of the Holy Cow* (2009) and Mahatma Gandhi's

views on the cow. Citing several instances of 'beef parties' (social gatherings that celebrate

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[16] Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste,* section 20 (points 9 and 10).
[17] See Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2013), 168-171.
[18] Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right', *The Caravan*, 1 November 2019, https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/fight-beef-democratic-right.

eating beef) and their subsequent implications in terms of social exclusion, Shepherd highlights the persistence of atrocities and violence against Dalits in contemporary society by people who use the cow as a driving force for this violence. This violence in the name of the cow is often in the form of lynching and flogging. 'In the name of the cow' can be equated to the protection of the cow-as-image, rather than the protection of the cow-as-animal. Additionally, the article discusses cow protection and evinces with statistics the way in which cow populations are left to starve because of neglect and lack of infrastructure once cows become old. The relationship of caste to the cow-as-image is apparent in this article, and I will further elaborate this in Chapter One.

In addition to the association between the caste system and the cow, which is a foundational element of this thesis, caste is also often linked to class. However, class is not usually linked to the cow. There are many differences between caste and class, but for the purpose of this thesis, it is important to note that caste is hereditary (that is, one is born in a certain caste group) while class is not. But what is class? As scholar and civil rights activist Anand Teltumbde explains, class is originally derived from the Latin 'classis' which categorised society by wealth. There are two main understandings of class in the social sciences: the Marxist (from Karl Marx) and the Weberian (from Max Weber). Weber stratified society in terms of social class being an interlink of wealth, status and power. Status and power were connected to reputation in society; this reputation, in addition to the ownership of capital (wealth), helped establish class stratification amongst people. In contrast, the Marxist view of class was based on the differences 'in the manner in which one class laboured and produced wealth, while another, which exercised private rights of ownership over the means of production, lived more or less off the toil of the labourers'.[19] Strains between these classes

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[19] Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2018), 96.

resulted in class struggles. Marx never defined class as being singular; in fact, his definitions of class changed according to the context of discussion, showing that class was not merely a label for groups of society, but extended to the interactions amongst these groups. As Teltumbde notes: 'while class potentially brings people together, the very nature of caste is to divide them by seeking hierarchy. The classes in India, therefore, are to be conceived with broad aggregation, in relation to the dominant mode of production—which means that class analysis in a caste-based society would necessarily subsume caste'.[20] Therefore, 'classes may be seen as embedding castes'.[21] Simply put, this shows that even though caste groups like Dalits are bracketed under one umbrella, they do not form a 'class' because both class and caste divisions and distinctions between groupings like 'Dalit' still exist.

When discussing class, the term 'subaltern' is often used, where the definition of a subaltern is one whose societal position lacks identity. The term itself is borrowed from Antonio Gramsci and is used widely in Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1985).[22] Her essay describes the issues of the subaltern, and also the term 'subaltern' itself—in Gramsci's original usage in Marxist theory, the subaltern is a 'proletarian', who is not inserted into the capitalist (and therefore public) sphere. The problems of subjecthood and agency are inherent in this position (or lack of position), and a call to build a position with identity for the subaltern would then be to insert them into the public sphere. A heteronomous society would then emerge with the subaltern speaking for themselves where we would not study the subaltern as an object but rather learn from the subaltern.[23] Y. S. Alone disputes the

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[20] Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste*, 98.
[21] Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste,* 92.
[22] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313. See *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea,* ed. Rosalind Morris (Columbia University Press, 2010) for a revised version of her original 1985 essay as well as responses and critiques of her work in the contemporary context.

[23] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'

use of the term 'subaltern' for Dalits, calling it a 'generic rubric'.[24] Reading subalternity against Ambedkar's definition of caste where caste is 'not only a division of labor but also of laborers',[25] it can be understood that degrees of caste and its divisions vary across India and are not a singular experience. Using this understanding of caste and class, Alone contends that the term 'subaltern' pertains more to class conflicts. Alone also argues that the subaltern as a category is within the idea of the postcolonial, where postcoloniality has excluded understandings of caste. In locating the subaltern 'in opposition to hegemony', the question of '"whose hegemony"' is then crucial.[26] Ultimately, Alone shows that Dalits are a heterogeneous group of people who cannot be bracketed under a single category like 'subaltern'.[27] Therefore, for this thesis, I refrain from using the term subaltern so that this grouping under an imagined homogeneity can be avoided.

While the threads of caste hierarchies underlie this thesis, the other hierarchy of humans above other animals is also at the forefront. Above all, the relationship between the human and the cow leads this particular discussion. I will bring human-animal relations into the discussion of the cow as part of art in India to supplement the complex and layered humanities and social sciences scholarship on the cow. This will be explored in a later section of the Introduction as well as Chapter One which describes the cow as evolving into a human image. In scholarship that involves the human and animal, the terms more-than-human and other-than-human are often used. More-than-human has implications of hierarchical issues because of something being *more than,* but it also challenges the superiority of humans. Other-than-human, however, fits into the frame of nonhierarchy and so becomes suitable for an approach that speaks to the interconnectedness of different kinds of oppression. Other-than-human also creates a perhaps

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[24] Y S Alone, 'Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance', *University of Hawai'i Press* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 141.

[25] Alone, 'Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance', 141.

[26] Alone, 'Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance',167.

[27] Alone, 'Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance',141.

unavoidable tension between the human and the 'other'. Othering involves differences between a dominant group and an 'other' which is always placed in comparison to the dominant. Therefore, I just use the term 'cow' which best describes the bovine I write about here.[28]

Further to the discussion on human-animal relations, in this thesis I use the term 'image' in association with the cow. In fact, Chapter One of this thesis discusses the ideas and development of the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal. For the argument presented in this thesis, the understanding of 'image' is crucial. Images have been debated in scholarship extensively, notably by Hans Belting, W.J.T. Mitchell, Victor Turner and C.S. Peirce.[29] A brief overview of some of their arguments is useful in situating the image in relation to my own argument. While I will not dwell on any particular argument by these scholars, this overview is to show how I decided to use the term cow-as-image, as opposed to cow-as-symbol, cow-as-metaphor, and cow-as-icon. Since the thesis ultimately argues for a bringing together of the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal to disrupt systems of oppression like caste, we can ask the question: what is image?

To begin answering this complex question, I first turn to W.J.T. Mitchell's description of an image in *What do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2004):

> the word image is notoriously ambiguous. It can denote both a physical object (a painting or sculpture) and a mental, imaginary entity, a psychological imago, the visual content of dreams, memories, and perception. It plays a role in both the visual and verbal arts, as the name of the represented content of a picture or its overall formal gestalt (what Adrian Stokes called the "image in form"); or it can designate a verbal motif, a named thing or quality, a metaphor or other "figure," or even the formal totality of a text as a "verbal icon." It can even pass over the boundary between vision and hearing in the notion of an "acoustic image." And as a name for likeness, similitude, resemblance, and analogy it has a quasilogical status as one of the three great orders of

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[28] Catherine Price and Sophie Chao, 'Multispecies, More-Than-Human, Nonhuman, Other-Than-Human: Reimagining Idioms of Animacy in an Age of Planetary Unmaking', *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (28 March 2023): 177–93, https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v10i2.1166.

[29] I draw from Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), Belting's *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton University Press, 2011), Turner's *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967), and Peirce's general considerations of the symbol, index, icon and sign.

sign formation, the "icon," which (along with C. S. Peirce's "symbol" and "index") constitutes the totality of semiotic relationships'.[30]

The totality of semiotic relationships is beyond the scope of discussion. In fact, I do not even dwell on index or icon, because the cow most closely resembles a symbol in Peirce's triad icon-index-symbol. Even though the cow is iconic in that some representations bear close resemblance to the cow, it is not an icon because the significance of the cow lies in its cultural associations, linking it more to the symbol. The word symbol as opposed to a metaphor or allegory is often used in relation to the cow because a symbol 'has a *real* existence' as opposed to an allegory which is arbitrary or a metaphor which is in terms of something else.[31] On the other hand, allegory is constantly used as a narrative tool to suggest satire or morality.[32] In India, the cow is not an allegorical character. Though it can be linked to satire and morality, the cow is more widely accepted as a symbol of upper caste Hinduism. I prefer to use the term 'image' and will outline my reasoning below.

Mitchell describes the differences between a picture and image. A picture is the 'entire situation in which an image has made its appearance' but an image is within this picture.[33] This is a useful point at which to begin the discussion because the cow is not a picture; in this thesis, the 'picture' would be upper caste Hinduism and the cow would be the 'image' within this larger picture. Mitchell's contention that 'images are really quite powerless to do anything without the cooperation of their beholders' holds true in relation to the cow;[34] the cow-as-image is powerful because of the context within which it is placed, but the cow-as-animal *as image* is actually powerless. The 'beholders', especially when they come from certain groups of people like upper caste Hindus who believe in the cow's sacrality and divinity, overdetermine other

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[30] W J T Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.

[31] John A. Cuddon and Rafey Habib, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, ed. Matthew Birchwood et al., 5. ed., publ. in paperback, Penguin Reference Library (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 699.

[32] Cuddon and Habib, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 432, 433 and 699.

[33] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, xiv.

[34] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 7.

ways in which the cow is perceived and attribute a certain potency to the cow-as-image. Further, the 'potency of these images doesn't reside merely in their presentness'.[35] This is particularly important in the context of the violence in the name of the cow that Dalits often face. The disruption staged by artists through their artwork addresses this violence and offers alternative ways of beholding the cow-as-image (for instance, as food or as a companion), ensuring that the cow's linked symbolisms as image are not only in the current moment (presentness).

Hans Belting suggests an anthropological approach to answer the question: what is an image? This is because Belting feels that the idea of an image is related to its cultural standpoints, and thus to anthropology. In art history, Belting notes that the image is addressed in terms of artworks that are tangible and have a clear history; he further notes that an 'image defies such attempts of reification, to the extent that it straddles the boundary between physical and mental existence'.[36] It appears then as if the image remains in abstraction, both 'as a product of a given medium…but also as a product of our selves, for we generate images of our own…that we play out against other images in the visible world'.[37] The cow, in addition to its animality (which is its given medium), is a product of society in India (as the 'product of ourselves'), and thus remains abstract and not absolute in its interpretation.

If an image remains abstract, how can we connect it to symbols (mentioned before), which seem more absolute in their signification? In *The Forest of Symbols* (1970), Victor Turner turns to the definition of the symbol in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, where a 'symbol' is a 'thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling

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[35] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?,* 12. Mitchell's reference to images and their potency is in the context of Dolly, the cloned sheep, and the destruction of the Twin Towers in 9/11, but the potency and currency of those images can extend to the cow-as-image.

[36] Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton University Press, 2011), 2.

[37] Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, 2.

something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought'.[38] This definition indicates that a symbol, in the broadest sense, is anything which signifies, represents or stands for something else. Common and popular symbols are the dove which stands for peace, or the lion, which stands for strength and courage. However, Turner's use of symbols is in relation to his fieldwork in Zambia where he studied the Ndembu tribe and their particular symbols in relation to rituals. For me, his contention that these 'ritual symbols' had to be studied in their contexts, and in relation to the events in which they played an important role, is useful because it shows that 'symbols are essentially involved in social process'.[39] Turner substantiates his arguments by describing instances of a girl's puberty ritual in relationship to the importance of the *mudyi* tree, which Turner calls the 'milk tree'. His descriptions of the importance of the tree and its different meanings in relation to the puberty ritual bring out an overall theme of social organisation, which eventually shows that the tree, 'at its highest level of abstraction…stands for the unity and continuity of Ndembu society'.[40]

If we equate the cow to the milk tree, since the cow is involved in a social process, what are the different ways in which we can read the cow as both image and animal? Turner's examination of the milk tree as a symbol was to show that it was key in maintaining the social order of the Ndembu society through its mobilisation in important rituals. In India, the cow is also a key symbol like the milk tree. It is crucial here to remember that the cow is part of many 'rituals', most commonly linked to upper caste Hinduism. The cow as a 'ritual symbol' is definitely 'associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means' but is also a 'dynamic entity, at least within its appropriate context of action'.[41] The cow is part of several social contestations that include but are not limited to upper caste Hinduism, making it a dynamic

[38] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19.
[39] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 20.
[40] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 21.
[41] Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 20.

entity that can be disrupted by artists. The cow is not static and moves beyond its upper caste Hindu links, thus enabling artists to mobilise and contest its ties to religion and sanctity. It is this dynamism that I want to stress, for the four artists presented in this thesis show that the cow is a dynamic entity that can be disrupted within a context, and moved away from its absolute meaning as a symbol of upper caste Hinduism, thereby showing that the cow is indeed not a symbol because it is not absolute. Even though I contend that the cow is not a symbol, it is sometimes described in India as symbolic of Hinduism. Here, the cow is not a symbol *of* Hinduism but rather it has attributes and significations that *tie it* to Hinduism.

When seeing the cow-as-image, we are in fact seeing a living animal as image. Here, we can note, like Mitchell, that 'images introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds'.[42] So the cow-as-image draws on values of a social context of upper caste Hinduism, but also has the potential to introduce new forms of value, and this is perhaps articulated through understanding the artworks in this thesis as new forms of value in a social moment that rejects normative understandings of the cow. Cow-as-image recalls images of animals as the earliest sign of human interaction with animals, and even perhaps the earliest religious and ritualistic images. Mitchell proposes a 'generalizing of the mutual mapping of iconology and natural history' which is similar to my proposal that the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal require to be understood and brought together as mutual entities so as to critique and challenge systems of oppression like caste.[43]

How does this idea of images work for the cow-as-image? Bernard Stiegler notes that 'an image by definition is one that is seen (is in fact *only* one when it is seen)'—[44]the cow is extremely visible in terms of sheer numbers in India, but the cow-as-image that I am referring to is not in terms of its visibility, both on the streets and in art, but more in terms of the cow's

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[42] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?,* 92.
[43] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?,* 89.
[44] Bernard Stiegler in Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, 5.

invisibility as an animal, and its *visibility* only as an image that embodies its symbolic, iconic, metaphoric value.

It is important here to distinguish that the cow-as-image is not the image *of* the cow. My use of the word 'image' includes images of the cow but also suggests that the cow-as-image goes beyond visual representations to include imagination, divinity, symbolism, ritual, metaphor and icon. For the purpose of the argument presented in this thesis, I avoid using the term 'symbol' where possible, and instead use the word 'image' to describe the cow. Though the cow has come to stand for something else in that its symbolism evokes an upper caste Hinduism, the cow's links to this symbolism is not absolute. In fact, the artists discussed in this thesis disrupt the nature of this implicit symbolism of the cow and show that the cow can be understood as beyond this. In using the term 'image', the scope for discussion on the cow is more expansive, and can include ideas of the symbol, metaphor, and allegory, without remaining bounded by them.

I turn to John Berger, who asserts that 'all images are man-made'.[45] He further shows that 'an image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved – for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing'.[46] In India, the cow-as-image is constructed through man-made ideas of religion (Hinduism) and caste. My argument that the cow in its association with Hinduism can be disrupted shows that these ideas of the cow are approachable, therefore illustrating that the cow is not a symbol with an absolute meaning. As an 'image', the cow *can be* approached and transformed, and also disrupted.

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[45] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin on Design 1 (London: Penguin, 2008), 2.
[46] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 2.

Beyond an 'Indian' Art History

Since caste occupies a substantive place in this thesis, understanding caste in relation to art in India is imperative. This section explores the contexts of caste and art, as well as caste in art, situating this within the larger history of Indian art in the twentieth century. Caste in art is often referred to as 'Dalit art' and I will critically reflect on the way in which this term functions as a category.

Art historian Gary Tartakov offers the most useful definition of Dalit Art as an *'expression of Dalits about their own experience'*, similar to Dalit literature. [47] This renders Dalit Art a category wherein art is done by a Dalit, a layered term of self-identification. This identification of self as a Dalit plays a crucial role in Dalit identity and Dalit art, and not every individual chooses to embrace it.[48] According to Tartakov, Dalits do not share in the common, visible histories that are considered normative. Instead, their art reflects an 'unshared' history (and this would mean unshared with upper castes) in the way that the art reuses ancient imagery (so as to then include themselves in a history that they were previously denied access to), imports foreign imagery (for an alignment with more identifiable history) and invents new imagery (so as to forge their own space in culture).[49] Therefore, the process of defining 'Dalit

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[47] Gary Michael Tartakov, 'Dalit Painting Seen from the Outside', in *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. Gary Michael Tartakov (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237.

[48] See the subtitled section 'A Question of Identity' in Teltumbde, *Dalits: Past, Present and Future* to gain an overall understanding of Dalit identity and see Yashica Dutt, *Coming out as Dalit* (Aleph Book Company, 2019) for a personal account of initially hiding Dalit identity and then 'coming out as Dalit'.
Dalit identity is not homogeneous. Ambedkar tried to bring all Dalits together under the identity of 'Dalit' but did not succeed in this regard. The Mahars, his sub-caste, willingly followed him, but he faced some hostility from other Dalit groups like the ones who look to Jagjivan Ram and Annabhau Sate instead. Others believe that after they followed Ambedkar and converted to Buddhism, they were no longer Dalits as Ambedkar sought for them a new identity that disengaged from the demeaning nature of the term 'Dalit' itself. There are also Dalit Christians and Muslims who do not even officially fall under the umbrella of Dalit (this was spoken about in detail earlier). Ultimately, however, the term Dalit has emerged as an overarching identity for all oppressed classes.

[49] See Gary Tartakov, 'Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery', in *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. Gary Michael Tartakov (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 16-18. The social uses of these artworks become part of an identity reformation in terms of identification, legitimation and exploitation.

art' is layered, and the categorisation of art as 'Dalit art' is also constantly debated in current scholarship and among art practitioners.

Many artists prefer not to be solely identified as 'Dalit artists' for this identification then limits their scope in engaging with art practices that move beyond and question notions other than caste.[50] In fact, a significant critique by scholar Deeptha Achar points towards an anonymity in authorship of artwork relating to caste—there is no individuation and identification of artists and their careers in art historical narratives other than perhaps Savi Sawarkar (discussed in Chapter One) and G. Chandru (discussed in Chapter Two).[51] Since there are many Ambedkar statues dispersed around India, one might assume that the identification of the sculptors of these statues are known, and thus represent a historical narrative of a caste identity in relation to art. Though the identity of the artists who first came up with iconography and design of the Ambedkar statue is known, they are not Dalits.[52] The individuation and identification of artists as Dalit is, of course, in relation to the historicity of caste as represented in art. In the present day, contemporary artists often highlight their caste identities in relation to their practices. This is seen in some notable exhibitions on art and caste, both within India and outside. For instance, an exhibition in Chennai titled *Vaanam Art Festival* brought together artists who portrayed caste in their work for Dalit History Month in April 2023. Similarly, the Kochi Biennale (2022-2023) had a satellite exhibition titled *Dismantling Aesthetics of Inhibition: Representing Difference* curated by Y. S. Alone, which grouped artists who questioned upper caste modernity in the Indian art world and instead presented their understanding of what Alone termed 'Ambedkarite aesthetics', essentially aesthetics linking to

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[50] In my interviews with artists, they embraced the idea of a community that came together as Dalit artists but did not want to be restricted in terms of an art practice that only portrayed caste.

[51] Deeptha Achar, 'Notes on Questions of Dalit Art', in *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined*, ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak, K. Satyanarayana, and Nicole Weickgenannt Thiara (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 186-188.

[52] Gary Michael Tartakov, ed., 'The Politics of Popular Art: Maharashtra', in *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 94.

Ambedkarite thought.[53] The four artists whom I cover in the case studies that follow speak openly about their lived experiences with caste and those experiences in relation to their art. Understanding these experiences is essential to fully comprehending their artwork.

In Indian art history, initial studies often placed Indian artists in a comparative framework, juxtaposing their styles with that of a foreign artist. In fact, Sanjukta Sunderason highlights the fact that artists in late-colonial and early postcolonial periods are always framed within 'third-world aesthetics' where a confluence of war, famine and anti-imperial movements come together.[54] Partha Mitter dwells upon this comparative approach of Indian versus foreign as one of dependency, where the Indian artist is placed in an interlocked relationship with their Western counterpart.[55] Also, this comparison is often presented as the imitation of a 'superior' Western style by the Indian artist (for example, Cubism was 'mimicked' by Gaganendranath Tagore). Another point worth noting, as elucidated by Mitter, is that the coloniser (in other words, the Western artist, and in turn, the Western artist's style) did not face any compromise in the value of their art or character as an artist, but the Indian artist immediately was bracketed as a mimicker who was influenced by the West. [56] However, as Stella Kramrisch has expounded, the Indian artist brought their own unique cultural perspective of India to the 'Western' art form, thus creating a style that was truly their own, a style that falls into the bracket of the idea of the Indian modern.[57] This style perhaps reflects the emergence of a space shared by visual art and the politics of decolonisation.

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[53] Y S Alone, curatorial statement displayed in *Dismantling Aesthetics of Inhibition: Representing Difference* exhibit, Gallery OED, Mattancherry, Kochi, 10 December 2022 to 10 January 2023.
[54] Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization* (Redwood City, United States: Stanford University Press, 2020), 3-4, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ed/detail.action?docID=6199686.
[55] Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion books, 2007).
[56] Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 7-8.
[57] Stella Kramrich in Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*.

The identification of individual artists in relation to caste is in contrast to the identity of the 'Indian' artist as a response to the colonial. In art history discourse, the concern with this 'Indian' identity is extensively written about. The individuality of an 'Indian' identity as an artist was essential to the forming of art practices as a response to the overlap in colonialism and nationalism. This idea of 'Indian' was synonymous with a 'national art' that reformulated tradition and also sought a reversal to the dominance and intrusion of Western ideologies.[58] It is useful to look at how Western thought initially helped shape ideas of 'artist' and 'high art'. At the same time, Tapati Guha-Thakurta shows that a discovery of 'Orientalist' ideas and Indian art traditions guided this identity of an 'Indian' artist and gave them 'a sense of past heritage, and a present goal of recreating a "national art"'. [59] Particularly in Bengal, Abanindranath Tagore led this reformulation and reversal, establishing an Indian identity for Indian art. The categories of Western and Indian were significant to the functioning of the Bengal School and its 'exclusive nationalist ideology'.[60]

The Bengal School is an example of a style that often took the form of a nationalism in art and produced a 'special "community"' of artists who aligned with these ideas of the nation and India in opposition to the West.[61] Since this nationalism was also tied to Hindu ideologies and the nation, the 'special community' perhaps excluded those who did not think in terms of the nation and Hinduism, especially those from non-upper caste communities. Even the schools and universities set up for art by the British led to an adoption of Western techniques to portray a 'nationalism' in Indian identity through art. Yet this nationalism itself was a 'modernity that did not create space for an interrogation of cultural caste practices'.[62] The idea of tradition was

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[58] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*, Cambridge South Asian Studies 52 (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

[59] Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 8.

[60] Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 6.

[61] Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 9.

[62] Alone, 'Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance', 145.

confined to the greatness of indigeneity without looking at how adhering to tradition also adhered to caste. In fact, Y. S. Alone points towards a 'protected ignorance' where upper caste ideas permeate the understanding and pedagogy of the Indian art world; the disregard for caste is apparent in the discourse on modern art and its ties to national identity and pedagogy.

As Partha Mitter highlights in his work, Indian art (modernism) should not be read as being influenced by the West; rather it requires to be understood as an active or conscious choice of the artist to use Western techniques to serve their own means. Previously, too, Mitter highlighted through several case studies that though artists employed 'Western' techniques learnt in schools set up by the British to educate Indians on good taste, it is also true that nationalism and a Hindu identity was depicted in and through art of the early twentieth century that used these techniques for the artists' own purposes rather than as knowledge inspired from Western thought. [63] This follows Dipesh Chakrabarty's description of Europe (the 'West') as 'an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity in South Asia'.[64] Similarly, the art of the 'West' remains embedded in 'everyday habits of thought' in terms of art training and processes. This is also similar to Edward Said's notion of 'affiliation' where art is presented as an exchange of transnational ideas, and where a national art came through as a conversation with the international stage. The continuation of colonial period ideas in art practices even after Indian independence in 1947 is significant to understanding art produced in this period not just as a resistance to domination, but as an embeddedness of art practices in a colonial past. Therefore, nationalism can be seen as something that 'challenged the claim to political domination' but

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[63] Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism.*
[64] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference - New Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2009),4, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828654 in Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 13.

also 'accepted the very intellectual premises of modernity on which colonial domination was based'.[65]

The idea of modernity as a condition also becomes significant when considering modernism as a temporal period. Rebecca Brown examines the post-independence period of modernity in India right up until the 1980s but specifies that she is looking at the condition of modernism as opposed to the modern postcolonial as periods in history. Brown's modernity reflects a condition of being modern, thereby linking modernism to the people and changes occurring in pre and post-independent India:

> The term *modern* does not indicate a periodization; I eschew the usage sometimes employed in art history and literary studies in which *modern* indicates either a specific period or a specific genre of art. Instead, *the modern* or *modern* indicates a particular approach to the world embodied in an epistemology of progress, a faith in universals, the primacy of the subject, and a turning away from religion toward reason. The term *modernity* is used here for the condition that embodies this epistemology.[66]

The desire to arrive at the 'truth' of Indian culture lies within this idea of a modern condition and much of the art of the period that Brown covers strives to explore the paradox of 'how to be modern *and* Indian?',[67] thereby suggesting that the *condition* of being modern and being Indian were hard to merge, especially in the context of an 'Indian' identity always compared to the West.

In temporal spans, most scholars propose that the first phase of modernism in India was established as a broad and widespread resistance to colonial rule (which ended in 1947 when India gained independence). Sonal Khullar's consideration for a 'revised periodization' of modernism in India as extending from the 1930s to the 1980s seems significant to establishing links and 'affiliation' between practices, periods, nationalism, colonialism, and different art

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[65] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 30, in Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations,* 19.
[66] Rebecca M. Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980*, Objects/Histories (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.
[67] Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980*, 1.

forms.[68] Ranjit Hoskote identifies the 1980s and 1990s as having four unique experiential landscapes that emerged for Indian artists. The first is a breakdown of classical painting as being central to Indian art practice. The second is a breakdown of classical and formal sculpture. The third concerns the expansion of human experience, possibilities and the engagement of virtual space and new media as made available by the Internet. The fourth is a conversation between the viewer and space—how one views art as an experience in a conventionally defined space like a museum or gallery as opposed to the viewing of art in a public space, which has an unbounded territory.[69] The works of art I look at in this thesis are produced in the twenty-first century, but refute as well as draw and evolve from the four landscapes of Indian art that preceded this period, as well as the ideas of modernism/modernity that came before.

It is evident that the precise year that modernism started in India is not particularly useful for the argument here. What is important to note instead is the parallel and multiple movements that took place before and after Independence (1947) that relate to modernism in India. As is seen through scholarship on art history both globally and in South Asia, art, especially art of the avant-garde, seems to emerge from power centres that are metropolitan cities. The art of the Renaissance positioned itself around places like Rome, Florence and Milan. Similarly, the art in India has situated itself around Bombay (now Mumbai), Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Delhi, occasionally around Chennai (Madras) in Tamil Nadu.[70] Movements in modernism correspond with these geographies;[71] examples abound in the movements and

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[68] Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930-1990* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 20.

[69] Ranjit Hoskote, 'Indian art: influences and impulses in the 1980s and 1990s,' in *Indian Art, An Overview,* ed. Gayatri Sinha (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2003), 207.

[70] See Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947,* 8-9, for a discussion on power and authority within geographies and the centre-periphery relationship.

[71] See Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980.* Rebecca Brown speaks of the difficulty in capturing a singular moment in post-independent Indian art. She simplifies the telling of this period in art by taking a regional and group-based approach, while acknowledging that this approach does not pay attention to the physical movement of artists around the country.

groups like the Progressive Artists Groups (associated with Mumbai), the Delhi Shilpi Chakra (associated with Delhi), the Baroda School (associated with Baroda), the Bengal School (associated with Shantiniketan), the Madras Art Movement (associated with what was then Madras, now Chennai).[72] The mention of these specific movements as corresponding to their geographies is to balance the differentiation that often occurs in art history, where Euroamerican places and periods employ specificity as opposed to generalised geographies to describe non-Western categories (for example, northern Renaissance as opposed to Asian art).[73] However, as Kajri Jain notes, this kind of specific listing does not account for the interactions and influences within and among such groups that transcended vernacular barriers. The vernacular is a contradiction in its etymological root where the Latin *verna* indicates a 'slave born in the master's house'.[74] In India, vernacularity is not tied to regions but can be associated with them, steering clear of the 'valorization of the "Indian village"' as well as the 'ideologically loaded "urban turn"'.[75] Often, the idea of 'village India' has especially been equated to a social category that has resulted in idealised and romanticised representations of India. This idealisation of rural India was in the form of a primitivism that was 'an antithesis to colonial urban values'.[76] These representations once again show the preoccupation of 'Indian' identity that played a prominent role in the art of Indian modernism, but that this 'Indian' identity has excluded caste stratifications and instead romanticised village and urban divides. Ambedkar too mentioned this romanticisation and stressed the importance of breaking this binary and staying away from romanticising the rural.[77]

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[72] This grouping is based on Rebecca Brown's division based on region and group.

[73] Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*, Objects/Histories (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 17.

[74] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 14.

[75] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 14.

[76] Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-47,* 10.

[77] G. Pandey, 'Introduction: The Subaltern as Subaltern Citizen', in *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA*, ed. G. Pandey, Intersections: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories (Taylor & Francis, 2009), 3-4, https://books.google.co.in/books?id=LTuMAgAAQBAJ.

The condition of the modern as modernity, as well as modernism as a period, eventually evolved into post-modern and contemporary art. Hoskote traces two points from which the development of Indian contemporary art (as a period that came after modernism) emerged: the 1981 *Place for People* exhibition as well as the *Third Sotheby's Prize for Contemporary Indian Art* that took place in 2000. The 1981 exhibition saw art that showcased symbology and abstract idealism and works that engaged with the realities and localities of the time. A shift from the earlier identification of nationalism and identity could be seen in the new art which succeeded in 'immortalising the fortitude and resilience of their subjects without romanticising their tragedy'.[78] Art critic Geeta Kapur wrote the catalogue essay for this exhibition and described a postcolonial condition of worldliness in this exhibition that neither rejected the 'West' nor concurred with Indian nationalist ideas (both of which made up a large part of modernism in India).[79] The second exhibition in 2000 was quite different from the *Place for People* exhibit in that it drew from popular culture like cinema, music videos, games, and satellite television, while also highlighting icons and symbols that connected to large Indian audiences. Overall, the striking characteristic of this art that was 'contemporary' looked outward at surrounding locales rather than inwards towards achieving and succeeding at showcasing an 'Indian' identity. It also avoided romanticising the rural and the idea of struggle and resistance.[80] This looking outward at surrounding locales is also seen in the exhibition *Bombay/ Mumbai 1992-2001* (2001) curated by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Geeta Kapur as part of Tate Modern's *Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis.* Tate Modern's general idea was to explore twentieth-century art centres of the global world, and Rajadhyaksha and Kapur centred the idea of Bombay/ Mumbai as a city with a 'self-battling visual culture' and a 'desire to

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[78] Hoskote, 'Indian Art: Influences and Impulses in the 1980s and 1990s', 203.
[79] Geeta Kapur, ed., *Place for People,* (Bombay: Jehangir Art Gallery; New Delhi: Rabindra Bhavan, 1981). Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organised by and presented at Jehangir Art Gallery, November 9, 1981-November 15, 1981, and Rabindra Bhavan, November 21, 1981- December 3, 1981.
[80] See Hoskote, 'Indian Art: Influences and Impulses in the 1980s and 1990s'.

transform' after the riots of 1992-1993.[81] This idea of looking outward as the 'contemporary' included the 2016 curation of the Shanghai Biennale by the RAQS Media Collective with the core question 'how does one make propositions to the world, and how does the world change in response to what has been said, and imagined, propositionally?', once again indicating that the idea of the contemporary still includes and is shaped by reactions to and from the outside world.[82]

Previous scholarship on Indian art history did not really engage formally with 'Dalit art' as a category till 2012 when Gary Tartakov published his study titled *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery.* According to Tartakov, the invisibility of Dalit art as an existing category highlights the invisible casteism prevalent in modern and contemporary Indian art discourses. Further, he contends that in rendering caste *invisible,* it becomes '*un*noted and so *un*thought and *un*attended to.'[83] To render caste 'visible', Tartakov's book presents a survey of Dalit visual culture, with essays from a number of leading scholars like Tartakov himself, Nicolas Jaoul, Owen Lynch, David Szanton and Saurabh Dube. The scholarship elucidated in this book focuses on surveying Navayana Buddhists and Ambedkarite imagery. The Navayana Buddhists or New Buddhists are the community of Dalits that converted to Buddhism in 1956, led by Ambedkar. Ambedkarite imagery mostly refers to statues of Ambedkar around the country, especially in the states of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. The subjects explored by this publication present an analytical survey of Dalit visual culture: Tartakov examines ancient monuments from a Dalit perspective and also investigates the creation of identity in space in Ambedkarite and Navayana imagery. Jaoul explores Ambedkar statues in Uttar Pradesh in terms of material medium

[81] Asia Art Archive, 'Bombay/Mumbai 1992-2001' in 'Century City: Art and Culture in the Modern Metropolis', 2001, Asia Art Archive, https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/geeta-kapur-and-vivan-sundaram-archive-bombaymumbai-19922001/object/bombaymumbai-1992-2001-exhibition-view-43350.

[82] Raqs Media Collective, Propositioning the World: Raqs Media Collective and the Shanghai Biennale, interview by Maya Kóvskaya, 2016, https://works.raqsmediacollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Propositioning_the_World_Dialogue_with.pdf.

[83] Gary Michael Tartakov, 'Introduction: Invisibles?', in *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. Gary Michael Tartakov (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

(cement and stone) as well as their placement (physically and metaphorically) within societal structures. Lynch takes an anthropological approach to the Jatav artists and looks at the links of their visual culture to festivities like Ambedkar's birth anniversary celebrations. Dube looks at the work of Savi Sawarkar and its relationship to and with caste, gender and subaltern scholarship, and the ways in which it stands out as being different and an agent of power for the artist. Finally, Szanton presents a historiography and study of the relationship of Madhubani paintings to the Dushad community practices, as opposed to the popularised version of Madhubani paintings practiced by Brahmin artists. This book was a first attempt in engaging with a 'new' area of Indian art history and visual culture in a space that previously rarely mentioned caste and certainly did not engage with 'Dalit art' as a category of its own.[84]

Like Tartakov, Deeptha Achar reflects on Dalit art as a 'category in the making' rather than a category that already exists in the realm of other groupings of Indian art.[85] She explores the functionality of a category such as Dalit art within the larger idea of very few artists identifying themselves as part of this category, as highlighted in the beginning of this section. Achar's edited volume (along with Shivaji Panikkar) titled *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism* (2012) contains a collection of essays on art and resistance, including from scholars like Geeta Kapur and Y. S. Alone, highlighting a link between art and activism through a combination of the politics and aesthetics.[86] Deeptha Achar suggests that literature on Dalit visual culture should explore 'the aesthetic as a site of political challenge'.[87] This is similar to the idea of partisan aesthetics as defined by Sanjukta Sunderason where the interaction between art and politics is a complex field where politics enters the domain of art through a certain aestheticization. In her discussion, Sunderason's comments on the progressive art of the 1940s

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[84] See *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery,* ed. Gary Michael Tartakov (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[85] Achar, 'Notes on Questions of Dalit Art,' 183-184.
[86] Deeptha Achar and Shivaji Panikkar, eds., *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism* (UGC National Seminar on the Issues of Activism: the Artist and the Historian, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012).
[87] Achar, 'Notes on Questions of Dalit Art', 190.

(often seen in tandem with the Progressive Artists' Group formed in Bombay in 1947) as an art for the people where 'the idea of progressive art concretized the needs of vision both in style and in rhetoric, and produced genres and vocabularies of visual reportage, art as testimony, and aesthetic forms that assimilated, for a while, cultural production to social activism to political partisanship' is useful in navigating the relationship of art and politics in Dalit art and visual culture as a site of political challenge.[88] For instance, the importance of Ambedkar statues in politics can be seen in the Bahujan Samaj Party's victories in Uttar Pradesh. This entry of statues into the public realm shows an appeal in using a visual symbol as an aesthetic form participating in a political field.[89] The visual symbol of an Ambedkar statue in the political field is an example of the assimilation of aesthetic forms that underlie cultural production in the realm of the political. Understanding Ambedkar statues as part of a political culture reflects Hugo Gorringe's suggestion that 'mobilization around statues need not entail empty symbolism and can serve to effect meaningful social change'.[90] The iconography of the statue is noteworthy: Ambedkar's blue suit places him as a man who has been to the West, and the Indian constitution in his hand reflects his education, secularism and involvement in the drafting of this seminal document. Here, we see an aestheticisation of the political through the insertion of a recognisable icon (Ambedkar, as a statue) into a public space for the purpose of Dalit recognition as well as political engagement.[91] In fact, Ambedkar refers to the Dalit as

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[88] Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization,* 24.

[89] See Tartakov, 'The Politics of Popular Art,' 89-97, and Jaoul, 'Learning the use of Symbolic Means: Dalits, Ambedkar Statues, and the State in Uttar Pradesh,' 98-106 in for a comprehensive study on Ambedkar statues, their iconography, their insertion into the public space and Dalit viewership

[90] Hugo Gorringe, 'Ambedkar Icons: Whys and Wherefores', in *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*, ed. Suraj Yengde and Anand Teltumbde (Gurgaon, Haryana, India: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2018), 330.

[91] This aestheticisation of politics is not in terms of its association with a fascist regime, as is commonly understood in connection with Walter Benjamin. Ambedkar represents the 'political' and his insertion into the public sphere as a statue is the aestheticisation of the political.
Also see See Suraj Yengde, *Caste Matters,* (Viking: 2019). In addition to public spaces, Ambedkar is also a significant feature in private homes. Suraj Yengde talks about multiple Dalit identities believing in one primary identity: Ambedkar. This is in a spiritual sense, and Ambedkar is made to seem like a god who has solutions for every problem. Yengde refers to this as 'Ambedkargodism'.

having their 'persona confiscated', indicating a lack of space for their agency, identity and histories.[92] The aestheticization of the political helps create such spaces.

The existence of Ambedkar statues ensures a visibility for Dalits in the public realm. Like the presence of Ambedkar statues around India, the purpose of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Kumari Mayawati's sculpture park in Uttar Pradesh was to establish Dalit representation in the public realm.[93] Mayawati's insertion of these icons has divided public opinion—on the one hand, Dalits show their full support in now having claim over a space that was previously denied to them, while on the other, public opinion is critical of Mayawati's use of funds on party propaganda and self-aggrandisement. Kajri Jain argues that the erection and insertion of these monuments in terms of 'aesthetic redistribution' is not separately symbolic or economic, but instead a meeting ground of culture and economy. Ambedkar and Mayawati statues in public spaces are an example of the interaction between art and politics. Here, art (the statue) presents a site through which to think about the artistic field and its relation to politics as an interaction between caste Hinduism and Dalit resistance, where the aesthetic is once again a site for political and social change.[94]

While the visibility of Dalit identity as an interaction of art, politics, culture and economy, is seen through Ambedkar and Mayawati statues, Tartakov points towards a caste-neutrality of the Indian art world. Tartakov insists that galleries and other institutionalised spaces prefer art that is not social commentary. Instead, a caste unity rather than an annihilation of caste becomes prevalent in the art world as it makes caste invisible in the name of unity. Art

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[92] See *Let's Read Dr.Ambedkar - Lecture3 by Dr. V Geetha - Caste, Untouchability and Democracy (Part 1)*, Let's Read Ambedkar- Lecture Series, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QsAk-Gz9-N0&t=2676s for a comprehensive understanding of Ambedkar and his writing.

[93] Kumari Mayawati is an Indian politician who is part of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The party was founded by Kanshi Ram, who is also considered Mayawati's political mentor.

[94] Kajri Jain, 'The Handbag that Exploded: Mayawati's Monuments and the Aesthetics of Democracy in Post-Reform India,' in *The New Cultural Histories of India: Materialities and Practices,* ed. Partha Chatterjee, Bodhisatva Kar and Tapati Guha Thakurta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 139-179.

historian Kobena Mercer asks whether the 'historical problem of "invisibility"' is solved due to new exhibitions that include artists not previously represented.[95] In other words, do the exhibitions of Dalit art in the present day solve the historical problem of the invisibility of caste? Artists in the contemporary moment who explore caste and art in their work are making caste discourse more prevalent in the art world. That the 'past is foundational to the representational practices of the present' is important as the past invisibility of caste has been foundational to practices in the present that make caste visible;[96] this does not solve the historical problem of invisibility of caste but shows that art is a site within which such discourse can emerge.

The artworks examined in this thesis respond and subsequently disrupt the cow-as-image. The question here then becomes: in what frame of viewership do these artists stage this disruption? Are art and visual culture sites for such contestations? Most of the work analysed in this thesis draws from personal histories of caste and a relatedness to the cow. The cow itself is a public image, but the response by artists to this public cow-as-image is embedded in a personal narrative that also draws from public politics. The interaction between the personal and the public results in a critique of society that is expressed through and by art. It is tempting to term these artworks as activist in nature. Even though these works are created within particular histories and social and political contexts, and they circulate in public, the works are not conceived as activist images nor described as such by their makers. Rather, the artworks serve as a visual register of social reality.

Karen Strassler's focus on 'image-events' that are 'a political process set in motion when a specific image or set of images erupts onto and intervenes in a social field, becoming a focal point of discursive and affective engagement across diverse publics' is similar to the

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[95] Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 8 in Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations,* 6.
[96] Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 11.

discussion on art and activism.[97] The artworks here are not 'image-events' but they respond and intervene in a social field, engendering conversation and visibility of caste oppression. Unlike images that are made for a particular event or disseminated to large audiences, the artworks discussed in this thesis draw from larger social, political and historical struggles and moments. In that sense, the place of these artworks within regimes of seeing and being seen bestow on them the capacity and potential of transformation, mobilisation and critique. Art, in the case of these artworks and for these artists, marks 'a mode at odds with dominant discourses on contemporary art and the new world order it marked'.[98] Art also allows for a questioning of the dominant forces but is also subject to questioning from these forces.[99] The act of making such art in the framework of the present moment and questioning a long-standing history of images like the cow shows that art is indeed a site for such contestations and disruptions.

In *Beyond Appearances* (2003), Sumathi Ramaswamy characterises the 'visual turn' in modern Indian scholarship as being connected to the extensive writing in the fields of art history, as well as film and media studies. Visuality, which in Ramaswamy's terms implies 'regimes of seeing and being seen', is not beyond history, culture and politics.[100] She also speaks of the 'power of images to transform and mobilise self and community'.[101] This power of images is held not only within the idea of the cow-as-image, but also in the capacity of artworks to disrupt this seat of power. Additionally, the visual as 'the ground for the generation of theories that question the primacy of the written word in our understanding of the (Indian)

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[97] Karen Strassler, *Demanding Images* (Duke University Press, 2019), 9-10, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478005544-001.
[98] See Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 5. This is linked to her writing on the art curated by Ranjit Hoskote for the Venice Biennale (2011) that helped destabilise ideas of nationhood and the world that normally drive perceptions and interpretations of artistic practice.
[99] For instance, M.F. Husain was attacked for his representations of Indian goddesses and eventually exiled from India for these representations, reflecting what I mean by a 'questioning from these forces'.
[100] Sumathi Ramaswamy, ed., 'Introduction', in *Beyond Appearances?: Visual Practice and Ideologies in Modern India* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2003), xiv.
[101] Ramaswamy, 'Introduction', xiv.

past and present' particularly holds true in the case of art that questions caste oppression, for caste is rooted in the written word of ancient Indian texts.[102]

The 'visual turn' in this thesis, due to its links to caste and the layered history of the cow, can be grounded in visual culture. W.J.T. Mitchell has defined visual culture as the study of human visual experience and expression.[103] Kajri Jain has argued that art history, unlike visual culture, does not usually engage with the images' 'circulation and exchange, their rhythms and orchestrations, their enfolding into habit and ritual'.[104] Further, in visual culture, the corporeality of the viewer as well as the 'multiple sensory modes of engaging with images' is understood in terms of an image's visuality.[105] Art history, on the other hand, focuses on the 'corporeality of images' in terms of their formal qualities or their situatedness within contexts in historical thought.[106] In this study, separating art history and visual culture would then be in opposition to the main argument of the thesis. Since the argument combines animal studies and caste with art, the formal characteristics of the visual require to be understood alongside and in relation to their exchanges with the larger contexts of the cow in India. The interactions between art history and visual culture then play a significant role in mapping these different art forms and practices, as well as navigating the loaded image of the cow. While the thesis does not concentrate on the circulation of images within a sphere of production of a category like 'Dalit art', the importance of understanding caste contexts, lived experiences, and the environment (political, symbolic and natural) of the cow all remain at the forefront of the analysis. Additionally, while the cow interacts in other spheres that both relate with and are separate from caste, like the experiences of Muslims (discussed in Chapter One), or the

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[102] Ramaswamy, 'Introduction', xiv.
[103] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 6.
[104] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 19.
[105] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 19.
[106] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 19.

experiences and subsequent depictions in 'tribal' art,[107] the case studies, here, focus on art and caste as representative of themes of oppression.

Ramaswamy's idea of the 'interocular' which is different media working together shows that the power of the visual in India is an 'intervisual' field that intersects and interacts, forming a field of visual imagery that is changeable in that it is not isolated.[108] The artists and artworks examined here form this field of 'interocular' and 'intervisual' and even though they work in different media, they present art as a site that can stage disruption, not in isolation, but as a collective heterogenous unit made up of changing media, ideas, ideations, that are constantly forming a network of conversation with one another. As the thesis will show, though the artworks present different themes of the cow and its links to caste, the permeability of these artworks is evident since they question the same dominant mode of cow-as-image. The artworks' assimilation of aesthetic forms, and their engagements with the political, constitute a participation by artists in the political field in that they intervene and disrupt this field through their art. This participation of art in the political field then extends Deeptha Achar's suggestion that Dalit visual culture should explore the aesthetic as a site of political challenge. Following Sonal Khullar, the figure of the contemporary artist then becomes an 'examiner of traces and excavator of truths'.[109] This figure of the contemporary artist excavates individual caste histories and examines their relationship to the cow as constituting a unique mode of visuality.

As mentioned previously, the category of 'Dalit art' is debated.[110] The issue that remains at the forefront for those who seek recognition for this category is not whether

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[107] See Benoy P. J., 'Tribal Art and Dalit Art: Questions of the Contemporary', in Achar and Panikkar, *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism* for a discussion on the category of Tribal Art and its relationship to Dalit art.
[108] Ramaswamy, 'Introduction', xvi.
[109] Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 6.
[110] See *Dalit Is a 'Proper Noun', Not an 'Adjective': Prof Gopal Guru | NewsClick*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rciW7_ZGhxU. The debate on the word 'Dalit' and its formulations as either a proper noun or an adjective is most clearly visible in the nomination of the previous President of India, Ram Nath Kovind (2017-2022). According to Gopal Guru, the 'category (Dalit) is being used as an

opportunities arise for individual Dalit artists. Rather, a question of an affiliative collective where such a category is given recognition and a feeling of unity and kinship is created is important for the artist community. The case studies in this thesis, therefore, while exploring lived experiences of caste by the artists presented, do not rely on a category such as 'Dalit art', neither do they avoid acknowledging the links between caste and art. Whether the category should be used to describe the art remains the choice of the artist in identifying their role within such a space. To that extent, the argument explored through this thesis does not require such categorisation, though an acknowledgement is necessary that such categorisation has fuelled the reception of their work.

While I focus on four case studies in this thesis, the scholarly field that looks at the convergence of art and caste is growing and evolving. The case studies here are more focused on the cow in relation to caste and animal studies, but the visibility of art that comments on caste is a significant step in avoiding caste neutrality in the art world. This visibility is seen through exhibitions like the *Vaanam Art Festival* and the satellite exhibition *Dismantling Aesthetics of Inhibition: Representing Difference* at the Kochi Biennale, which I mentioned above.

Though the artists I study work in today's present, it is not my intention to say they are drawing from the modern, or that they are bracketed within the contemporary. My intention in exploring some of the literature on modernism is to highlight the preoccupation of Indian art with an 'Indian' identity. This 'Indian' identity largely excluded communities like Dalits and ignored caste practices. Old and continuing 'biases in visual imagery and in the interpretation

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"adjective" instead of "proper noun". It is a category, a word or a terminology which is very powerful and revolutionary. It cannot be collapsed in government allied categories such as Scheduled Caste or depressed classes. So, it has to be recovered and rescued from all these adjectives to restore its revolutionary meaning which is transformative'. Gopal Guru's comments show that Ram Nath Kovind was predominantly referred to as the Dalit President of India; his identity as a Dalit was of primary importance and used as an adjective for Kovind, rather than giving him a full-rounded identity as President (that also included his being Dalit). The word 'Dalit' appears to be used as both noun and adjective in categorisations like 'Dalit art' but this is beyond the scope of discussion.

of visual imagery' can raise uncomfortable questions and perhaps help to derecognise the oppression of the caste system: 'as we grow more conscious of how caste is portrayed, it becomes less and less comfortable to go along with it and more and more necessary to counter it and act democratically'. [111] The artists and artworks analysed in this thesis counter normative ideologies of caste and the cow, and use art as a site of disruption to counter protected ignorance.

Relatedness of the Artist and Animal

As an art historian, it is important to think about the relatedness of the artist to the animal in question, and then present an analysis that accounts for this relatedness. While animal studies are integral to this thesis, the artwork discussed in this thesis is not work about the cow. Rather, the cow's 'image' is used by artists to disrupt other ideologies, as will be evidenced through the case studies. Of course, to put the animal at the centre of my discourse would be to value and explore a collaborative process between artist and animal. For instance, Anna Tsing has called for a 'passionate immersion in the lives of nonhumans being studied'.[112] She suggests using the practice of the 'arts of inclusion' to acquaint ourselves with preservation.[113] Similarly, Catherine Johnston (drawing from anthropologist Tim Ingold) has spoken about 'a way of knowing about and knowing with animals' based on 'actual relationships, our day-to-day living and working'.[114]

My analysis as an art historian and the process behind the artwork by the artist are not immersed in the environment and behaviour of cows. In turning to a relatedness between human and cow as put forth by Radhika Govindrajan, it is my hope that the artist's use of the

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[111] Tartakov, 'Introduction: Invisibles?', 7.
[112] Anna Tsing, 'Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 50 (2011): 19.
[113] Tsing, 'Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom', 6.
[114] Catherine Johnston, 'Beyond the Clearing: Towards a Dwelt Animal Geography,' Progress in Human Geography 32 (2008): 646, quoted in Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor, 'More-Than-Human Histories,' *Environmental History* 25, no. 4 (October 2020): 724, https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emaa027.

cow image, and my analysis of that image, signifies the layered ways that 'the potential and outcome of a life always and already unfold *in relation to* that of another'.[115] Additionally, these entanglements of relatedness require to be understood as the relations between life forms that have both desirable and undesirable aspects. The specific set of interactions between the cow and human in India portray a dichotomy where the cow is revered as a divine being as Kamadhenu and as a mother as Gaumata.[116] The cow is also understood for being an animal: many people grow up *alongside* cows, thereby understanding that their natural instincts and behaviour also permeate the Indian landscape. In my study, the relatedness of the cow is seen in the cow's relation to artists but also then in its relation to *gau rakshaks* or *cow protectors*.[117] Many *gau rakshaks* possibly have cows and love them for their animality, but for this thesis, it is important to note that the *protection* of cows is in the name of the cow-as-image. Therefore, the relatedness of *gau rakshak* and cow is within the framework of the cow's image. However, relatedness in this thesis does not extend to the experience by the cow of this shared connection between human and cow. In highlighting the image of the animal and the animality of the animal, a certain anthropocentrism in my disciplinary analysis would be inevitable. I attempt to frame an approach to human-centred issues by bringing together the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal.

Ron Broglio speaks of an animal phenomenology and its inherent paradox: it is not what it feels like to run *like* a cheetah, rather it is *what* running is for a cheetah. The fundamental distinction lies in alluding to *what is* as opposed to *likeness*.[118] Here, artists are not looking at *what is* for cows. The issue that is being framed by these artists is not a problem *with* the cow;

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[115] Radhika Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies, Beastly Love in the Himalayas* (Gurgaon, Haryana, India: Penguin Random House, India, 2019), 5.

[116] These names attributed to the holy cow will be discussed in detail in Chapter One.

[117] Cow protectionism is elaborated in Chapter One, but here, *gau rakshaks* refer to those who 'protect' the cow as a Hindu divine symbol against those who are non-upper caste Hindu (Dalits and Muslims).

[118] Ron Broglio, "A Left-handed Primer for Approaching Animal Art," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 9, no.1 (December 2010): 35-45, http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/intellect/jvap/2010/00000009/00000001/art00004.

rather it is a human-made, historically charged issue of caste that is often activated in India *through* the cow. This relates to the cow as an image, used in artwork to signify or connote ideologies of an upper caste Hinduism. The cow as an image often means the cow as an animal is invisible. In its invisibility as an animal, it becomes a passive participant in social injustice. Lori Gruen uses an 'ethics of avowal' in arguing the importance in becoming acquainted with the links and interconnectedness between all configurations of oppression'. [119] An interconnectedness in two forms of oppression exists in relation to the cow and caste: the cow, perceived as an 'image', is oppressed because of its diminished animality, but caste as a form of oppression permeates the Indian landscape because of the cow as an 'image'. A complex web of relations then exists here: a historicised issue of caste that is often performed in the name of the cow in the present day, artists resisting and highlighting this issue using the implicit symbolism and image of the cow as linked to this historic oppression, and the larger question about whether this kind of use of the cow by artists to show a human issue is exploitative.

In Western discourse, the use of the cow as an image by artists perhaps sounds problematic: do we dare further exploit animals for our own human means? The cow as a living creature could be mistaken for being a passive object in the making of meaning for a human. Jacques Derrida describes this as the *animot* where the animal is a human word and a human representation.[120] In India, this 'exploitation' is not the same. Though caste is ultimately a human problem sometimes framed through the use of the cow (be it through food, labour, religion etc), the cow's use to frame caste stems from the layered and contradictory nature of the cow in India, where it is a friend, mother, goddess, and meat, all at once. This highlights the relatedness between cow and human in India, and its use in artwork takes root in this

[119] Lori Gruen, 'Samuel Dubose, Cecil the Lion and the Ethics of Avowal', 31 July 2015, http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/7/samuel-dubose-cecil-the-lion-and-the-ethics-of-avowal.html. in Bénédicte Boisseron, 'Is the Animal the New Black?', in *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 34, https://doi.org/10.7312/bois18664-002
[120] Bénédicte Boisseron, 'Introduction: Blackness without Analog', in *Afro-Dog* (Columbia University Press, 2018), xiv, https://doi.org/10.7312/bois18664.

relatedness, even though ultimately the anthropocentricism of the problem is brought to light. As Sugata Ray points out in his writing on the representation of turkeys in the early modern world of India, a painting is created by a human but is also an 'accumulation of interspecies relations' that helped formulate 'representational registers'.[121] Considering this 'accumulation of interspecies relations' as relations between the cow and human in contemporary Indian art practice is important and reinstates the relatedness of cow and human in India, where the cow is animal and image at once. While it then might be argued that the work discussed in this thesis is largely anthropocentric, I stress the importance of this 'relatedness' between human and the cow. Additionally, I acknowledge that the framing of caste itself is anthropocentric and using an animal like the cow for this framing comes with its own weight. It is crucial here to remember that it is the cow-as-image used for this framing of caste, and the cow-as-image draws from man-made ideas of the cow. The cow-as-animal is often diminished and forgotten; in fact, if the cow's animality was acknowledged, caste in the name of the cow might not even be at the forefront.[122]

Even though Steve Baker suggests that a dualism is a somewhat banal way of thinking about human-animal relations and notes an erasure in this form of thinking, the relationship between cow and human does reflect aspects of a classic dualism.[123] The cow is presented as object and subject, domesticated and sacrificed, and worshipped and disregarded:

> Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged *there* and *here.* Likewise they were mortal and immortal. An animal's blood flowed like human blood, but its species was undying and each lion was Lion, each ox was Ox. This—maybe the first existential dualism—was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed.[124]

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[121] Sugata Ray, 'From New Spain to Mughal India: Rethinking Early Modern Animal Studies with a Turkey, ca. 1612', in *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, ed. Karl Kusserow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 97.
[122] This will be detailed in Chapter One.
[123] Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, Essays in Art and Culture (London: Reaktion books, 2000), 17.
[124] John Berger, 'Why look at animals?,' in *The Animals Reader,* eds. Linda Kaloff and Amy Fitzgerald (New York: Berg, 2007), 253.

The use of the word *and* rather than *versus* is significant. The human and cow are not pitted against one another; instead, cows are 'subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed'. This classic dualism is perhaps only pertinent to the cow, as the cow is worshipped as divine and mother, is a symbol of Hinduism, and in its death, it is sacrificed (in early Hindu scholarship), and also relegated to Dalits to use as food and leather.

In breaking down the dualism of human and cow, it is seen that the singular cow is considered divine in the role of mother (Gaumata) and goddess (Kamadhenu). This shows a disregard for the species of cows, and only the god species of cows become relevant. The plural cow, as cattle, is a commodity or harvested crop rather than a divine being. Within the framework of economics, an odd paradox can be seen when looking at a cow versus looking at cattle in India through the lens of Kopytoff's singularisation. Singularisation is the reverse process of commodification. The singularisation of the cow derives from its association with divinity and motherhood, making the cow special and having a unique status, whereas cattle itself becomes a mass unit and therefore a commodity. While in India, governments have often used the argument of economic viability in defence of a national ban on cow slaughter, it is cattle that actually forms the basis of the argument as the cow alone remains associated with divinity. [125]

It is worthwhile to point here to Yamini Narayanan's term 'casteised speciesism' that exists in relation to the cow in India.[126] Narayanan defines casteised speciesism as 'caste being projected on to certain animals',[127] indicating that certain animals face oppression like caste because of their species attribution. In discussions on the cow, this casteised speciesism exists

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[125] See Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,' in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91.

[126] See Yamini Narayanan, 'Cow Protection as "Casteised Speciesism": Sacralisation, Commercialisation and Politicisation,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 331–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1419794 for a detailed discussion on the idea of 'casteised speciesism'.

[127] Narayanan, 'Cow Protection as "Casteised Speciesism": Sacralisation, Commercialisation and Politicisation', 335.

partly in relation to the sub-stratification of the cow as native (Indian), Jersey (a foreign breed), and the buffalo. When speaking of the divine cow, the cow that is considered sacred is the native Indian cow. It is not the Jersey cow or the buffalo that retain the divinity of the Indian cow. In its visuality, perhaps it is not dwelt upon whether a cow is native or Jersey or even a buffalo. The distinction carries more weight in sociological and anthropological accounts that are questioning animal advocacy and rights, as well as the relationship and treatment of cows by humans. This distinction also becomes important when trying to comprehend the symbolism of the cow in terms of the close reading of an artist's work. While the artists themselves might not be visually invoking a particular kind of cow (native or Jersey) or buffalo, the symbolism associated with the bovine is only through the native cow. For instance, the bringing down of the Styrofoam cow in *Bovine Divine* cited at the beginning of the Introduction shows that even a Styrofoam embodiment of the cow was aligned with the native and divine cow.

As subjects, animals indeed 'experience life and inhabit a world'.[128] The cow, in this regard, experiences and inhabits an Indian landscape, but then becomes an image in its own natural environment as a result of human thinking and symbolism. This recalls thinking in cultural geography where a distinction between 'animal spaces' and 'beastly places' is elucidated. The former is about understanding the human order of animal spaces while the latter is about the lived experiences of the animals within those human spaces (from which they can occasionally escape).[129] However, the cow does not seem to be able to escape from these human spaces, thereby always being tied to its symbolism.

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[128] Deborah Bird Rose, 'Cosmopolitics: The Kiss of Life', adapting Isabelle Stengers' influential work, e.g. *Cosmopolitics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2010), 102, in Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History*, Rethinking Art's Histories (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 169.
[129] Timothy Hodgetts and Jamie Lorimer, 'Methodologies for animals' geographies: cultures, communication and genomics,' *Cultural Geographies* 22, no.2 (2015): 285-286.

As indicated earlier, Dalits have faced large-scale oppression in India, partly due to their associations with the cow. Parallels can be drawn between systems of oppression like caste and studies on race. The intersections of the bodies of scholarship on race studies and animal studies is a useful framework from which to draw similarities between caste studies and animal studies.

Marjorie Spiegel's work *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (1988) reproduces illustrations of pictures of auctioned enslaved people and cows.[130] These pictures are placed side by side to show that society knows that it is wrong to treat Black people *like animals*. Spiegel then asks why we still treat animals *like animals* if we know that in fact nobody should be treated *like animals.* Spiegel's writing is interesting for it obviously reflects on blackness and race as a foundational base for animal studies. The use of the word *dreaded* indicates that Spiegel knew that a comparison such as the one she presented was problematic.[131] As Benedicte Boisseron's critique points out, Spiegel's study fails to see race as 'a permanent presence inextricably part of the animal question'.[132] Boisseron's argument is that race and the animal question require to be treated as a true combination rather than a sequence of ideas that follow one another where race is first looked at and the animal question is looked at subsequently. For example, Spiegel's assertion that nobody should be treated like animals follows an analysis of Black people being treated like animals, therefore placing race before the animal question. Boisseron then points to a new system of 'mutual racialization and animalization' where blackness is not 'used as a means to serve the next cause' but rather as a race-animal combination that is mutual. [133] Similarly, Zakkiyah Iman Jackson also relates the idea of the animal to colonialism and the act of enslavement. She suggests that the idea of the

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[130] Marjorie Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (Heretic, 1988).
[131] Spiegel, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*.
[132] Boisseron, 'Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question', 2.
[133] Boisseron, 'Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question', 2.

animal stems from enslavement and that 'black people are animals occupying the human form'.[134] This discussion is relevant to caste and the cow, for the cow-as-image partly stems from the oppressive nature of caste. Caste is tied largely to upper caste Hinduism which has resulted in caste Hindus enslaving Dalits and their culture. For instance, as we will see in Chapter Three on artist Sajan Mani, Kerala, India, had feudal systems of land ownership in place and these land owners enslaved Dalits. Mani's terming of his ancestors as 'beasts of burden' on the field mirrors Jackson's suggestion that black people are animals occupying the human form;[135] Mani states that his ancestors were treated the way cows ploughing the field were treated, suggesting that Dalits are animals occupying the human form. It is interesting that Mani likens Dalits to the cow since the cow-as-image is sacred, but the cow-as-animal is most often forgotten.

Che Gosset's essay 'Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign' (2015) also points towards this in terms of intersectionality and the sequential framework within which race studies and animal studies are viewed. Gosset signposts the danger in this framework: 'first slavery was abolished and now forms of animal captivity must be, too. It is as though the animal is the new black even though blackness has already been racialized through animalization.'[136] This danger lies in the idea that *the animal is the new Black;* this comparison replaces the Black with an animal, not only reflecting the sequential problem that Boisseron noted, but also indicating that oppression in terms of being Black does not exist in the present day and the animal has replaced the Black as *the new Black* in terms of that oppression. *The animal is the new Black* shows that the human race has progressed beyond an acknowledgement of racism in the present day when instead 'blackness should constitute the primary matrix in which we

[134] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 22.
[135] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author.
[136] Che Gossett, 'Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign', *Verso Books,* September 8, 2015, Accessed: 11 July 2020. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2228-che-gossett-blackness-animality-and-the-unsovereign

think about animal rights' where there is a mutualisation of racism and animal studies.[137] Here, we can again draw a parallel to Mani's term 'beasts of burden' in relation to caste; a mutualisation of caste and animal studies might be the way forward in thinking about the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal.

Animal rights activism similarly questions the human-animal divide, but shows that 'contesting the divide with a racial paradigm indeed carries the potential effect of reinscribing a discriminative approach that one had sought to reject in the first place'.[138] In doing so, 'the black is removed from the human species'.[139] In fact, Boisseron cites the work of Afro-Pessimist Frank B. Wilderson who talks of the meatpacking industry in Chicago and the way in which cows are accumulated to be killed in a similar way to Black bodies being accumulated and killed during slavery.[140] A call for a mutual racialisation and animalisation where race is not used as a stepping stone for the animal question and animal rights is a crucial step in furthering the dialogue of and between race and animal studies. It is important to provide scope for discussion in both spaces, so as not to further a system of oppression. The same framework can be applied to the studying of caste and the cow, where neither oppression in animal studies nor oppression in studies on caste are used as a way to prioritise one over the other. This is similar to the 'ethics of avowal' where becoming 'attuned to the interconnectedness in all forms of oppression' is of prime importance.[141]

How can the art historical productively engage with the cow in a discussion that is not thoroughly anthropocentric and does not prioritise any systems of oppression? The art discussed in this thesis largely uses the cow to frame a human problem. None of the art is *about* the cow. If this is a discussion on animals in art, one might ask why we are still looking at art

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[137] Che Gossett, 'Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign'.

[138] Boisseron, 'Introduction: Blackness without Analog', xi-xii.
[139] Boisseron, 'Introduction: Blackness without Analog', xiii.
[140] Boisseron, 'Introduction: Blackness without Analog', xviii.
[141] Boisseron, 'Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question', 34.

that centres human beings. If art history were to 'find the inspirational courage to move beyond an exclusive concern for the human… and to embrace more planetary intellectual challenges', the cow in India requires to move beyond its mere symbolic terms.[142] Then, 'scholars must write as if the histories of the human and other-than-human are part of the same intimately interwoven spectrum rather than lying in binary opposition'.[143] Additionally, since humans and other-than-humans are part of evolution, our constructions in culture and society are 'natural', and in being 'natural' we are all 'linked *at root'*.[144] Further, the way the cow is approached in art practice and analysis also requires to prioritise the cow's animal nature as at least being equal to its symbolism. Astrida Neimanis put it succinctly when stating that 'any policy or action aimed at ameliorating environmental problems must take into account human desire, motivation, and values; a deep understanding of environment cannot be divorced from human imagination, culture and institutional and social practices'.[145] The ecological concern with cows as shown in *Bovine Divine* at the beginning of this Introduction is seldom explored in India, due to the symbolic value assigned to the cow. I do not wish to question the work of artists or art historians (or other disciplines that choose to engage with art or the artist), but instead I want to suggest that we construct or at least begin to think about the cow in India outside its image. By not prioritising the interests of the cow or human over one another, there is a place for an 'analytical borderland' where 'competing interests are analyzed and reshaped' to enable the cow's animality and image to be given equal value, so as to disrupt the hegemony perpetrated by its image in the first place.[146] Therefore, using an analytical framework like animal studies in conjunction with caste studies and caste contexts is helpful in parsing the

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[142] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 153 in Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye,* 1.

[143] Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye*, 8.

[144] Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye*, 11.

[145] Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén, 'Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene', *Ethics and the Environment* 20, no. 1 (2015): 80, https://doi.org/10.2979/ethicsenviro.20.1.67.

[146] Cajetan Iheka, 'Human Meets Animal, Africa Meets Diaspora: The Conjunctions of Cecil the Lion and Black Lives Matter', in *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics*, by Cajetan Iheka, 2021, 153, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478022046.

contemporary moment of the cow-as-image and its use and disruption by artists through their artworks. Bringing together these two approaches not only pays attention to the ecological, but also to caste, thus enabling a deconstruction of the contemporary moment of caste oppression in the name of the cow.

On Method

The exploration of caste and the cow in contemporary art became the primary focus of my thesis after the publication of an article by Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd titled 'Freedom to Eat: Beef as a Democratic Right' in the November 2019 issue of *The Caravan,* a popular magazine of politics and culture (I have outlined and referred to facts and interpretations from this article earlier in the Introduction).[147] Overall, the article was an extremely insightful piece that outlined not only instances of trauma and violence taking place against Dalits in the name of the cow, but also brought Ambedkar's argument on beef consumption and 'broken men' to light.

Particularly striking to me about this article were the accompanying images by artists G. Chandru and Rajyashri Goody. Unfortunately, in *The Caravan* article, though the artworks accompany the text as illustrations, they are not part of the active discussion by Shepherd. The artworks can be identified by their captions; the captions contain briefly worded narratives that describe the key themes in the work, as well as the titles attributed to the work by *The Caravan.* The absence of an engagement with artworks that accompanied an otherwise extremely informative article greatly surprised me, piquing my curiosity about the works themselves. In searching for the images online, I realised that their contexts had not been well discussed or articulated in academic scholarship. In fact, Chandru's images (discussed in detail in Chapter Two) only made an appearance in *The Caravan* article, so I had to rely on the brief captions in

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[147] Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.

the article to contextualise his work. On the other hand, Rajyashri Goody's images were discussed by her on her website, and this provided a foundation from which I could further explore the contexts of her work.

The paucity of scholarship that spoke on caste and art became apparent to me. As I have discussed above, Gary Tartakov's book *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* (2012) was one of the first collections of essays on art and caste. Other books like *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism* (2012), also bring together a collection of essays that highlight caste and art in relation to resistance. Scholars like Y. S. Alone, Santhosh Sadanandan, Brahm Prakash, and Rahul Dev, among others, have also contributed greatly to the field, both in these collections, as well as individual essays and articles in journals. Artists themselves have also been increasingly writing about their own practices—for instance, Rajyashri Goody's writing helped me understand the contexts of her work that appeared in *The Caravan* article, and Kirtika Kain has also written extensive descriptions and reflections on her artworks in the field. Recently, a new wave of art exhibitions about caste and art have resulted in curatorial notes also becoming part of this field, both in India and the diaspora. Some of these were mentioned earlier like the *Vaanam Art Festival* (2022) and *Dismantling Aesthetics of Inhibition: Representing Difference* (2023). Earlier exhibitions like *Eyes Re-Cast* (2008) are also noteworthy. Exhibitions outside India have also been significant: *Wake up Calls for my Ancestors* (2022) in Berlin, Germany, *Earth 200CE* (2022) in Sydney, Australia, and *Where Art Belongs* (2022) in Boston, U.S.A. are some recent displays. While the increased awareness and scholarship on caste and art has been tremendously encouraging, there is still scope to explore these works further. Additionally, a gap still exists in relating this to the scholarship on art and animal studies.

When researching animal studies and art in the context of India, limited scholarship came to light. An exhibition and subsequent catalogue titled *The Holy Cow and Other Animals: a Selection of Indian paintings from the Art Institute of Chicago* (2002) showcased a range of

interactions between animals, mortals and immortals in different realms. The exhibition and publication was useful in understanding the range of animal depictions in India, despite the exhibition being limited to the collection from the Art Institute of Chicago.[148] Sugata Ray's writing on the turkey titled 'From New Spain to Mughal India: Rethinking Early Modern Animal Studies with a Turkey, ca. 1612' (2021) was inspiring and showed the importance of tracing animal imports in Mughal courts to understand multispecies relations.[149] Another article, Rinu Krishna's 'Putting on the Dog: Canine Companions in the Select Paintings of Kilimanoor Varma Brothers' (2019) traces the insertion of 'canine companions' or dogs into portraits by Raja Ravi Varma. Krishna argues that the addition of dogs into portraits by Ravi Varma was to please a Western audience who kept dogs as pets, thus highlighting the way in which 'non human agencies contributed to colonial acculturation and mimicry'.[150] Most recently, Yashaswini Chandra's book *The Tale of the Horse: A History of India on Horseback* (2021), outlines the history of the horse in India and connects it with politics and society.[151] She captures 'the multifaceted significance of the horse as a sentient being';[152] her acknowledgement of the horse's sentience is an important step in relating the animal to art in India. In fact, I draw from this acknowledgement of sentience when I speak of bringing together the cow-as-animal with the cow-as-image, or in other words, using an approach that combines animal studies with caste studies.

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[148] Pratapaditya Pal and Betty Seid, eds., *The Holy Cow and Other Animals: A Selection of Indian Paintings from the Art Institute of Chicago*, 1st ed (Chicago, IL : Seattle, Wash: Art Institute of Chicago ; Distributed worldwide by the University of Washington Press, 2002).

[149] Ray, 'From New Spain to Mughal India: Rethinking Early Modern Animal Studies with a Turkey, ca. 1612'.

[150] Rinu Krishna, 'Putting on the Dog: Canine Companions in the Select Paintings of Kilimanoor Varma Brothers', *Littcrit* 45, no. 1 (June 2019): 24.

[151] See Yashaswini Chandra, *The Tale of the Horse: A History of India on Horseback* (New Delhi: Picador India, an imprint of Pan Macmillan Publishing India Private Limited, 2021), 217, for a link to caste. In her comment on bridegrooms and horses, she states that Dalit bridegrooms are often prevented from riding horses as part of their wedding festivities. This is noteworthy as horses are a part of wedding culture, especially in North India.

[152] Chandra, *The Tale of the Horse*, 19.

While an animal studies framework could have included a multispecies approach that also discusses other bovine creatures like the buffalo, bull, and ox, my decision to focus on a single species—the cow—is primarily due to the relationship of the cow to caste. Of all the bovines in India, the cow is most polarising in its visibility and most linked to caste atrocities and violence. The artists and their challenge to the hegemonic upper caste visuality of the cow does not extend to a critique of other bovine species. While there is scope to explore other bovines and their relationship to caste and other atrocities in India, the cow underlines the way in which caste violence plays out. While the thesis acknowledges other bovine species, especially the buffalo and bull (briefly discussed in Chapter One), the methodological determination to focus on the cow is to align with the artists, artworks, and caste violence, and further highlight these links and atrocities.

In order to fill the gaps in scholarship on art within the fields of caste studies and animal studies, I used the above-mentioned sources and also examined research on the cow, mainly in the fields of anthropology, sociology, religious studies, economics, and history, since writing on the cow image in art is partly limited to these fields. Furthermore, I closely looked at writing and scholarship on caste, again within these fields. The requirement to draw from broad critical frameworks, especially caste studies, animal studies, art history and anthropology, was based on the artworks and their contexts. Given the nature of the work and debates that they produced, I saw the need to draw on a wide range of scholarship that was not confined to a single disciplinary approach. This enabled me to develop a method and apparatus to address and critically analyse these artworks and the particular art practices of the artists studied in this thesis. It is also important here to distinguish that the orientation of this thesis lies within frames that span activist art, identity politics and the social histories of art, which I have used as a foundation from which I have formulated approaches with which to interview and converse with artists, gallerists and scholars in the field. I prioritise artists' own experiences and their

interactions with their work and their own histories, lived experiences and contexts of caste. Even though I rely on accounts from gallerists, scholars and other players in the art world of India, I do not approach this project from a connoisseurship or art market perspective.

Derek Conrad Murray proposes that combining different methodologies helps 'engage with the complexities of contemporary visuality'.[153] He goes on to argue for a 'reciprocity' wherein an exchange between disciplines will strengthen the overall endeavour.[154] The concept of 'reciprocity' also reflects and enriches the understanding of human and cow as entities beyond disciplinary engagements, thereby conveying a mutual role for cows and humans in India that is a compelling paradigm in the works of art discussed in this thesis. This dovetails with the importance of an ecocritical approach to art history. As the environmental humanities explores methodological approaches for art history and visual culture, these conversations are largely framed using Western discourse. The importance of framing this within South Asia, and in the case of this thesis, India, is timely.

Karin Zitzewitz's methodological tool of 'ethnography to forefront the historical contingency of artistic subjectivity, art practice, and the meanings of works of art' has guided my thinking on how to approach this thesis.[155] Using a close reading and analysis of each individual artwork in conjunction with interviews of a large number of artists and scholars, I have been able to analyse their work in varying contexts and draw conclusions. The importance of listening to the voices of the artists to understand their art and its interpretation remain at the forefront of my method; my understanding of these works and my writing about these works has grown dialogically. The sensitivity that comes with engaging in a dialogue with artists is crucial to the idea of listening. Even though the artists I look at identify as Dalit artists, their

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[153] Derek Conrad Murray, 'On Reciprocity: Expanding the Dialogue between Disciplines,' *Visual Studies* 36, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 178, https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2021.1969805.

[154] Murray, 'On Reciprocity: Expanding the Dialogue between Disciplines'.

[155] Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13.

lived experiences are vastly different and highlight a non-uniformity in caste-life narratives. Often, a homogeneous experience of being Dalit is what is expressed in scholarship and categorisations such as Dalit art. I move away from such categorisations by focusing on the way in which the artist has narrated this contextualisation in my dialogues and engagements with them.

Deciding and choosing from the numerous artists who engage with art and caste was a difficult task. Initially, I relied on certain criteria to ensure that the artists I was speaking with resonated with my aims for this project. There were three primary criteria that I prioritised. First, that the artists require to be working in the present; that is, the artists and their artworks to be examined in the thesis should be situated in the contemporary moment, preferably in the twenty-first century. Second, that their artwork should be related to the cow in the broadest possible way—directly through representation, through suggested references, or through medium and material. Finally, that the artwork requires to be within a caste context linked to the cow drawing from personal history and collective narratives. In setting out these criteria for my research, I was able to make a longlist of artists who worked in the contemporary period on the cow and caste. While the research for this thesis began with extended research and conversations with most artists on my longlist, for the final thesis, I was able to further hone my criteria so as to address emerging and recurrent themes I discerned in my interviews. These themes, which are outlined in each of the case study chapters of this thesis, formed the basis on which the decision to include four artists—G. Chandru, Sajan Mani, Siddhesh Gautam, and Kirtika Kain—was formed. These themes and the artworks by these artists best articulated the relationship of caste and the cow that I was interested in exploring for this research.

My primary method of engagement with artists for this thesis was through interviews. Interviews allowed me access to artists and artworks, and their own biographical contexts in relation to caste and the cow. My interviews with artists and scholars were the most significant

to my own understanding of caste, art, and the cow for this thesis. The clues provided in their interviews guided me in my research. For instance, the artist Chandru did not explicitly say he was influenced by the Madras Art Movement, but through his interview, clues about the inspiration of teachers and styles from this movement were clear. Similarly, Sajan Mani mentioned that he watched the ritual dance form Theyyam as a child, which showed me that this influence was clearly visible in his performances. Siddhesh Gautam's descriptions of his cartoon like style and presence on Instagram helped me understand his art process. Finally, Kirtika Kain and I had several discussions on caste and art, and her insights on her use of material and experiences in the diaspora enabled me to find scholarship on the same. Using interviews as a methodological tool was essential to this thesis because of the nature of the artwork as well as the artists all working in the contemporary moment. Additionally, even though the artists spanned a range of age groups, they were all living artists; interviews then became the most effective tool with which to collaborate and engage with artists and their work. Since I did not have the opportunity to study the artist in their creative space or look at the process of creation in their studios, listening to their descriptions of the artwork was extremely valuable. My interviews were held online and in-person, using a set of questions that became, in time, a conversation. Moreover, the conversation often extended from in-person or online Zoom spaces to casual exchanges on WhatsApp and Email that substantiated specific points of the interview or clarified certain stances of the artist or scholar. Largely, the reason for this was the Covid-19 Pandemic which put in-person data collection and interviews at a halt. However, though the Pandemic hindered my access to meeting artists, I was able to overcome this by using online spaces extensively. Additionally, when I finally did meet the artists once the Pandemic restrictions had been disbanded, I had already established a relationship with them which then made my subsequent engagement easier.

Interestingly, artist interviews taught me that more often than not, artists were used to interacting with journalists. This meant that their answers often aligned with a show's narrative or the way an artist might want to appear for public consumption. The 'tension between the priorities of the ethnographer and those of the interviewee' then became apparent.[156] Therefore, my responsibility as an interviewer was to ensure that the artist was comfortable in a new space which aimed to generate specific ideas about their art and initiate a scholarly exploration into sensitive issues like caste and the cow.

The methodological decision to pursue this form of engagement with artworks where the interview with the artist is prioritised is especially helpful when studying art in the context of social hierarchies like caste. The reading on caste helped ground my own understanding of caste as a non-Dalit woman and formulate my interview questions for the artists and scholars I was interested in speaking to. I used artist and scholar interviews to further my knowledge of caste, as well as to understand their artworks which had not otherwise been written about in academic scholarship.

The careers of the artists were also followed through newspaper articles, films, magazines, reviews, and the artists' own social media pages. My research also included understanding modern and contemporary art movements in India to situate these artists within these broad fields. I have relied on social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to enhance my argument as well as to find certain scholarship. While I acknowledge that these platforms are sometimes inaccurate, they have played a role in filling the gap in more formal scholarship on art, caste, and the cow in India. Additionally, the artists' presence on social media was an important factor in my analyses. Their presence on social media platforms, especially Instagram, allowed them a space in which to voice their own opinions on art, a space

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[156] Amanda Weidman, *Brought to Life by the Voice* (California: University of California Press, 2021), 17, https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.104.

they had been previously excluded from. Combing through their social media pages has helped me understand their views on the art world, and influences from their own personal narratives.

The artists I have selected mobilise a range of methods of circulation and distribution of their artwork across distinct platforms. These platforms range from social media (Instagram) to commercial gallery spaces, art fairs, and outdoor performance venues. These varying modes of circulation affect the way in which the artwork is received by different publics. Therefore, the meaning of the artwork changes across institutional and other platforms. For instance, Sajan Mani's *Art will never die, but COW?* starts off as a street performance that continues in an institutional space; the publics for each part of this performance represent the varying attitudes with which such a work can be received. It is interesting that these artists, though fairly new in the art world, are all represented or picked up by some institutional platform, gallery, or social media popularity. Even though their work is not strictly high profile like some of the Indian modern artists, the art discussed in this thesis has circulated among these platforms and become well-known. Differential access and inclusion for Dalit artists in upper caste dominated institutions is key to the conditions for the production and reception of all these works. The increased social and political critique of violence against marginalised groups in India is central to the way in which these artworks are produced and further circulated. While the goal of this thesis is to discuss the challenge to upper caste hegemonic violence in the name of the cow, some of the conditions of circulation, reception and mobilisation of artworks will be discussed in their particular contexts within each case study chapter.

The most important question for me through the writing of this thesis was in relation to my accountability to these artists. My own position is significant to the analysis I present. Here, I stress that I am being guided by the voices of the creators whose works I analyse when they openly share their lived experiences and how these enter their art spaces. While it is not the duty of the artist to educate the public (or me) about issues of caste, their interaction with Indian

art collectors through shows and exhibitions highlights the power of the visual in explaining caste and dispelling the protected ignorance of the viewer. Therefore, the analysis presented through this thesis should be understood in light of the pedagogical role art can play. Using artist interviews and secondary literature, I was able to illuminate, challenge, supplement and reframe existing knowledge about caste, art and the cow.

A conjunctural analysis is a useful tool with which to begin to understand the complex and layered role of the cow in India. A conjunctural analysis scrutinises 'convergent and divergent tendencies' that influence the moulding of power relations in a social field within a particular timeframe.[157] It demands the telling of the way 'lived organisations are made, remade and re-organised'.[158] Conjunctures themselves are a site for intervention; they help redirect social change and intellectual ideas and ideals. A 'new conjuncture' is then marked by 'the condensation of forces during a period of crisis, and the new social configurations which result'.[159] The cow has influenced power relations in India over a large time period and remade and redirected historical and religious thought. New conjunctures in relation to the cow have constantly been in motion and undergone several changes, especially in relation to the different ruling and political parties in power at specific times in history. Artists, in responding to these associations of the political and the cow, have helped formulate new conjunctures in that their responses are the 'new social configurations' which have resulted as a response to the cow-as-image. The conjunctures explored in this thesis articulate an understanding of the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal; they consider artworks using these broad analogies and bring together a new conjuncture that aspires to dismantle caste oppression.

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[157] Jeremy Gilbert, 'This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall', *New Formations* 96, no. 96 (1 March 2019): 6, https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:96/97.EDITORIAL.2019.

[158] Lawrence Grossberg in Gilbert, 'This Conjuncture', 18.

[159] Stuart Hall in Saloni Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance: Radical Stakes in Contemporary Indian Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 19.

Through the four case studies here, I hope to explore differences in the experiences of age groups, and the contexts of North and South India, as well as the diaspora. It is important to be aware of an Indian visual culture that stretches across geographies. While it is definitely true that cultures within Indian states are unique to those states, it should not be forgotten that artists travelled across these geographies, therefore creating a visual culture that transcended governing state demarcations. This thesis looks at artists from within India as well as from the diaspora, beyond these geopolitical locations. In doing so, I do not wish to erase the uniqueness that comes with experiences tied to localities and vernaculars. I am aware that presenting such a vast category of artists across media runs the risk of erasing specifics of state relationships. By using the lived experiences of artists, I hope to give voice to the individuality of their own geopolitical position.

The case studies outlined in this thesis represent artistic practices from India and the diaspora. The four artists discussed differ in age, and also have different backgrounds. Each individual's lived experience with caste is reflected in the art they produce. The relationship between the cow and caste, in particular, and this relationship as relating to art, is what I focus on as part of a larger framework of human-animal relations. The cow is a thread that runs through the artworks I look at in this thesis. However, the cow does not unify the artists' experiences as homogeneous but instead presents as an implicit marker of certain ideologies of caste and the way in which the cow is perceived. While I engaged with several artists who portray and suggest caste in their art, I will focus on four artists—G. Chandru, Sajan Mani, Siddhesh Gautam and Kirtika Kain—for this thesis. This is not because they are representative of a singular experience of the relationship between the cow and caste, but because they speak to some of the key themes and questions I wish to explore in this writing. The other artists and scholars I interviewed also helped support my explorations. I draw on their interviews and quote extensively from their own descriptions of their work, as well as the way they express

their understanding of the cow, caste, and art in India. For instance, I use Y. S. Alone's concept of 'protected ignorance' through the thesis; this is based on several long discussions and exchanges we have had on the subject. Similarly, I also have had conversations with Gary Tartakov and Saurabh Dube that enriched my knowledge of Dalit art as a category as well as caste and art scholarship. Artist Savi Sawarkar also helped me understand the category of Dalit art as well as his own work as being representative of the caste-human-cow relationship. Other artists like Rajyashri Goody and Prabhakar Kamble, both of whose works I draw on as comparisons, showed me different avenues of art in terms of ceramics and performance respectively, and helped me understand caste contexts in relation to these mediums. Speaking to Malvika Raj enabled me to understand the casteist connotations in traditional art forms like Madhubani and her difficulty in accessing these usually upper caste spaces. Additionally, photographer Jaisingh Nageswaran discussed the idea of relatedness between humans and cows in Tamil Nadu. Other artists like Lokesh Khodke and Uday Shanbagh, who were open about their caste locations as upper caste people, helped me situate my own positionality and also understand the wider contexts of the cow. Photographer Sujatro Ghosh also contributed to my knowledge on the cow in relation to the safety of women. It is difficult to qualify their statements, bold artwork and scholarship in this thesis; but their interviews and writing have expanded my knowledge on caste, art, and the cow in contemporary India, and served as an underlying thread in my analyses of the four case studies that speak to some themes I would like to focus on.

Outline of Chapters

The chapters in this thesis work across different scales. Attending to the cow as an image dominates the chapters which otherwise explore the nuances of the way the cow is perceived and how this perception can be disrupted in art using a wide range of media. The chapter titles in this thesis derive from the medium that the artist works in. This, in turn, suggests that

medium plays an important role in the way the cow is perceived. The differences in medium of the artworks highlight a range of ideas of aesthetic ecologies and social hierarchies in twenty-first-century India.

My reasoning behind G. Chandru's inclusion in the thesis is that he speaks to an experience of caste and art production that ran simultaneously with postcolonial thinking. While the works discussed were made in the 2000s, they stem from a training that developed when art was still being explored in India as an identity against colonialism. Caste did not have a huge role in this discourse. Sajan Mani's inclusion in the thesis helps speak to ideas of performance and performative practice in art and caste. Additionally, Mani's experience with cows is from a perspective of being from Kerala. His influences from an ancient ritualistic dance (Theyyam) associated with lower castes brings a unique context to this thesis. The presence of Siddhesh Gautam on social media in an age of activism in these spaces is an important view to include in the thesis. Also, an analysis of digital images presents a new way of looking at more traditional 'fine art' discourse. Lastly, Kirtika Kain's inclusion highlights experiences of caste in the diaspora. Kain's use of material as stemming from these diasporic roots as well as personal and collective inheritances is crucial to the understanding of caste, as well as the understanding of the cow as an image.

Chapter One discusses the history of the cow and traces its development as an image of importance in India. The primary aim of this chapter is to highlight that the cow is understood as an image in India, and that its animality has become diminished because of this image. The chapter looks at the native species of the cow, the cow in comparison to the bovine buffalo and bull, and the instrumental nature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century calendar prints in creating a cow nationalism. A brief look at the cow in relation to caste ends the chapter, to lead to the four case studies which explore the issue of caste and the cow in depth.

In Chapter Two, the artist G. Chandru's work is discussed to show that even though an artist's intentions might be to highlight the cow as an animal, the intrinsic symbolism evoked by the cow diminishes the way it is perceived. This chapter also shows the different ways in which works that portray the cow can be read against the backdrop of Hinduism and caste.

Moving from Chandru, Chapter Three looks at performance art through the work of Sajan Mani. Mani represents a shift in generation as well as medium from Chandru. He actively performs as the cow by imitating the cow's behaviour from close observation and interaction. The chapter suggests that even in an active performance and embodiment of the cow, the animal nature of the cow is not at the forefront of viewership, which is still limited by the cow's divine nature in religion.

Chapter Four explores the digital realm by discussing the works of Siddhesh Gautam. Since these works were created for an audience on social media (especially Instagram), the chapter briefly looks at the effect of the circulation of these images in such a space. However, the main focus of the chapter is the way in which Gautam has used the image of the cow as satire to represent caste atrocities as well as ecological concerns. The chapter once again shows that the cow's animality is diminished despite its predominant presence in Gautam's work.

The last chapter of the thesis extends the argument of caste and the cow to the diaspora by looking at the work of Kirtika Kain. Kain's work relies on the cow's material, especially cow dung. Looking at her inherited experiences of caste from her parents as well as literary figures like Babytai Kamble, the chapter suggests that Kain challenges hegemonic associations of the cow in its materiality. Her abstract work, nonetheless, does not highlight the animality of the bovine.

In conclusion, the thesis brings together four diverse artists and shows that their disruption of the cow as a hegemonic image of upper caste Hinduism is timely and vital. The

four artists' work, though extremely different, highlights the importance of discussing the animal (specifically the cow) in relation to caste. The work by these artists also shows that putting together scholarship on two systems of oppression, one as caste, and one as the animal, is crucial to disrupting and dismantling systemic oppression as a whole.

CHAPTER ONE
THE IMAGE AND THE ANIMAL

> …all images are man-made
> (*Ways of Seeing* by John Berger) [160]

The ancient Marundeeswarar Kovil (circa eleventh century) in Thiruvanmiyur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, is legendary for two reasons. First, it draws people from around India for its healing powers as *marundu eswara* or *medicine Shiva* is the temple's presiding deity.[161] Second, and more significant to this thesis, it holds a connection with Kamadhenu, the 'wish-fulfilling cow' or 'the cow of plenty'. In fact, the brightly coloured cow sculptures lining the temple walls are immediately noticeable to passers-by, linking the temple to the bovine image at first glance. My own intrigue in visiting the temple stemmed from this bovine link and from coming across a reference to an 'aggressive Kamadhenu' from Thiruvanmiyur when I searched for the story of Kamadhenu.[162] There are many versions of legends about Kamadhenu (who is also called Surabhi or Nandini), but all proclaim that she will provide her owner anything they desire. The foremost legend of Kamadhenu states that she was born from the nectar of the churning oceans. Kamadhenu then becomes a resident cow of Sage Vasishta, one of the most revered sages in Vedic history. Since Kamadhenu is of divine origin, she is worshipped. All cows from India are supposed to be manifestations of Kamadhenu, therein making all of them divine beings and heavily worshipped in the Indian subcontinent.[163]

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[160] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 2.

[161] Shiva is one of the primary deities in the Hindu pantheon. He is the third god in the triumvirate of Indian Hindu gods and is equated with destruction of the world. Shiva takes on many forms. People who worship Shiva are referred to as Shaivites.

[162] David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1980), 232, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400856923.

[163]'Kamadhenu - कामधेनू - the Wish-Fulfilling Cow', accessed 4 January 2020, http://www.harekrsna.de/kamadhenu.htm.

The 'aggressive Kamadhenu' reference seems to emerge from a story in the Tamil *puranic* corpus and links Kamadhenu to the Marundeeswarar Kovil. In this story, Kamadhenu is cursed to be 'troubled by Brahminicide' by the sage Dadhichi. Brahminicide is essentially the killing of Brahmins.[164] Due to this curse, Kamadhenu devours creatures in heaven, and on coming to earth to find more creatures to consume, she by some means returns to her pre-cursed state. She then finds a Shiva *linga* at this temple, and waters it with her own urine and milk from her udders, but also manages to bruise the *linga* with her feet. Shiva, now 'marked by her hoofs', becomes happy and then releases her from the Dadhichi curse.[165] A similar story that again links to the Marundeeswarar Kovil narrates an incident where Kamadhenu angers Sage Vasishta as she delays providing the milk required for daily worship. The sage curses Kamadhenu and says she will lose her divine status, but also advises that she worship Shiva at the Marundeeswarar Kovil to regain her divinity. Kamadhenu attempts to find the temple and discovers it by accident when her hoof hits the temple's buried Shiva *linga*. She then pours milk directly from her udders over the *linga* as oblation.[166]

In both legends, the Shiva *linga* at Marundeeswarar Kovil is marked by Kamadhenu's hoof. Unfortunately, this apparently visible hoof print on the *linga* is almost impossible to see due to the smoky interiors of the sanctum sanctorum during the time of *puja* or *the act of worship,* the only time the doors of the sanctum sanctorum are opened to the public. However, the story of Kamadhenu adorns several walls of the temple complex, alongside general images of Kamadhenu standing as a solitary figure or accompanying Lord Shiva and Parvathi (see Fig.1.1).[167] On my visit to the Marundeeswarar Kovil, though I was struck by the many

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[164] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition*, 230-232.
[165] Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South Indian Saiva Tradition*, 230-232.
[166] Aniruddh, 'Marundeeswarar, Tiruvanmiyur, Chennai', *TN Temples Project* (blog), 3 November 2019, https://tntemplesproject.in/2019/11/03/marundeeswarar-tiruvanmiyur-chennai/.
[167] Parvathi is considered Shiva's female consort, though she also goes by other names like Uma.

Kamadhenu images embellishing the temple, I specifically noticed an absence of cows present in the complex.[168] This was particularly odd because when I approached the temple, many cows were lounging and grazing right outside the complex as well as in the *Bhavani Medai* or religious platform close by. In fact, these cows are known to often block traffic coming in and out of Thiruvanmiyur. It seems ironic that the image of the cow as Kamadhenu was such a potent and rich presence in this religious place, but the actual animal seemed to have a diminished importance. This presence of the image of the cow in contrast to actual cows perhaps suggests that the cow as Kamadhenu is important, but the cow as an actual animal is not as significant.

My experience at the Marundeeswarar Kovil is only a small example of an interaction between human and cow in India. This relationship takes on many roles and each part of the subcontinent epitomises differing attitudes to and relationships with the cow. Contrasting relationships are also seen as divides between people who encounter the cow every day (perhaps in agricultural work) and the people who live in urban cities (where cows block traffic and motor vehicles are seen skirting around the cows like in the temple example above). It is impossible to capture the layered and nuanced relationship of cow and human in its diversity. However, this chapter attempts to bring together scholarship on this particular relationship, especially in terms of the normative relationship that has come to signify the links between the cow and human in India. The aim here is to develop an understanding that is similar to my experience at the Marundeeswarar Kovil. That is, the chapter will attempt to show that the 'image' of the cow seems to be of prime importance as compared to the animal. Through this chapter, this idea of 'image' and 'animal' is explored through a Hindu lens because the normative relationship the cow has come to signify is largely within the framework of Hinduism. Additionally, the artists I discuss later disrupt the cow as it stands within this Hindu

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[168] Though the temple is said to have a well-maintained *gaushala* or *cow shelter*, this is not prominent.

framework rather than within frameworks of other religions. Therefore, for the purpose of understanding their work, the Hindu framing of the cow is most crucial.

This chapter first traces a brief history of the cow from cave paintings at Bhimbetka to Indus Valley seals, as well as the cow's importance in Hinduism. Second, the chapter examines the importance of the native cow as linked to the divine cow. Third, the chapter looks at the differences between some bovine species—cow, bull, and buffalo. Fourth, the chapter distinguishes between the two versions of Kamadhenu in calendar prints, and then brings out the visual culture of the cow in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century calendar prints in connection to cow protection, politics and caste. Finally, the chapter situates a reading of caste and its links to the cow using the work of artists Prabhakar Kamble and Savi Sawarkar. Overall, the chapter brings together scholarship on the cow in India to argue that the cow-as-image appears to have more value than the cow-as-animal.

A Brief History of the Cow

This section traces a brief history of the cow in order to understand the development of the cow-as-image in present day India. The position of the cow in ancient civilisations shows that it was an important animal that served humankind, and it is this importance that led to its eventual domestication and relationship with the human, finally transforming from cow-as-animal to cow-as-image. This section is not intended as a chronological history of the cow, and instead aims to highlight the way in which the cow became a predominant force in India, especially in Hindu religion and ritual. The artists discussed in the following chapters challenge this predominance.

The *bos primigenius* or the *aurochs* are what gave birth to cattle around the world. These wild ancestors of cattle evolved from the *Leptobos,* an antelope-like mammal. [169]

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[169] It is suggested that this evolution took place in the early Pleistocene, around two million years ago.

Aurochs also had antelope-like features and large horns. As these predecessors migrated and grasslands expanded, they evolved into three different strains in order to survive in differing environments and climates. The three strains refer to the geographical regions that the cattle migrated to: the Indian/Asian, the Near East and European, and the African.[170] The wild Indian/ Asian auroch evolved into zebu cattle *(bos indicus),* known for their prominent shoulder hump. These cattle possibly had their first interactions and experiences with modern humans at Bhimbetka caves in present-day Madhya Pradesh, a state in central India. According to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the beginnings of these caves can be traced to the Upper-Paleolithic period.[171] The caves have several paintings depicting animals, specifically cows and bulls (see Fig.1.2). While each period of these cave paintings shows definite interaction (direct and indirect) between human and bovine, it is the later period paintings that evince this interaction as being one of a close and complex nature including devotional or ritualistic practice.[172] In fact, the depictions of the sport of bull-jumping show that interactions with bovines was common.[173]

It is unclear whether the occupants at Bhimbetka domesticated animals, though it seems likely given that devotional and ritualistic practice require close physical relations between humans and bovines. Evidence of the domestication of cattle in Asia is perhaps first visible in Mehrgarh, in modern-day Pakistan. Mehrgarh was roughly inhabited between 7000 BCE and 2600 BCE and is said to have laid the foundations for the Harappan Civilization (2200 to 2000 BCE).[174] Harappa was a major area in the Indus Valley Civilisation (2500 to 1500 BCE), which also included other important sites like Mohenjo-Daro. Archaeological evidence at Mehrgarh

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[170] Hannah Velten, *Cow* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 10-30.

[171] 'Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka – Archaeological Survey of India', accessed 15 June 2023, https://asi.nic.in/rock-shelters-of-bhimbetka-more-detail/.

[172] Tony Joseph, *Early Indians* (New Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2018), 13-16.

[173] Deryck Lodrick, 'Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture', *Dialectical Anthropology* 29 (1 March 2005): 63, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-005-5809-8.

[174] See Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin/Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2009), 65. According to Wendy Doniger, this period was the height of the Harappan Civilisation.

illustrates the domestication of local humped cattle or the zebu (*bos indicus*) which was the strain that migrated to Asia. The later Indus Valley Civilization also signals domestication as indicated by the numerous seals found in these sites, as well as evidence of remains of animals that show cattle as a source of food.[175] The lack of clarity of the script means that tangible proof linking the seals' renditions to domestication and worship of cattle does not exist. It is proposed that the seals from this period allude to a relationship with cattle at close quarters and even as religious depictions. For instance, Sir John Marshall proposed that the Bull seal alludes to Shiva or Pashupati because it depicts a god with a horned-head (see Fig.1.3).[176] Even though scholars have disputed Marshall's theory, the notion of ancient Shiva worship in association with animals has remained.[177]

After the period of the Indus Valley Civilisation, a Vedic civilisation (1500 BCE onwards) gained prominence in South Asia.[178] The religious texts known as the Vedas developed in this period. The Rig Veda, considered the oldest Veda, is still considered a sacred tenet of Hinduism today. In the Rig Veda, there is mention of the importance of cows. W. Norman Brown traces the development of the cow's history in the Rig Veda and shows its superior position as compared to other animals by isolating certain elements that make the cow significant: 'importance of the cow and its products for the performance of the Vedic sacrificial ritual; the figurative uses of words for the cow in Vedic literature and the later understanding of these figurative expressions as indicating literal truth; the prohibitions against violation of the Brahman's cow; the inclusion of the cow under the general doctrine of Ahimsa; and the

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[175] Lodrick, 'Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture', 64.

[176] Pashupati, an incarnation of Shiva, is considered to be Lord of the Animals.

[177] Doris Srinivasan, 'The So-Called Proto-Śiva Seal from Mohenjo-Daro: An Iconological Assessment', *Archives of Asian Art* 29 (1975): 47–58.

[178] See Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, 103. The Rig Veda was composed between 1700 and 1500 BCE. The other three vedas, that is the Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda, were composed between 1200 and 900 BCE.

association of the cow with the mother-goddess cult'.[179] Furthermore, Doris Srinivasan, in her study of the cow in the Rig Veda, highlights that the word 'cow' in different forms has appeared nearly 700 times in the Rig Veda. Srinivasan traces a history of the cow and its importance culturally and economically in the Vedas, using the Rig Veda verses as evidence for her arguments. She locates the different myths associated with the cow as well as the cow's importance in expressing the main ideas and aspects of life at the time, including ritual and sacrificial use.[180] D. N. Jha, a historian in India, has also written about the sacrificial nature of the cow in societies that relied on Vedic texts. Jha has also proposed that the importance of cow flesh surpassed its sacred value, and sacrifices of cows (and other creatures) provided ample food for people in these times. Jha describes the cow's role not only in relation to Hinduism, but also in relation to Jain and Buddhist texts and practices.[181] It is then evident from the cow's role in ancient civilisations that it was an extremely significant animal that was an 'ideal figure to further man's knowledge'.[182] The cow was useful economically and domestically and played a significant role in human-animal relations. Though, as both Brown and Lodrick highlight, there is evidence to support the claim that the cow was an economic and culturally viable creature, there is no proof that its sanctity was established at this time.[183]

While texts like the Rig Veda discussed above describe both the cow and bull, the bull seems to have been more visible in direct representation. Bovine creatures like the bull had a prominent role in these early civilisations (like in the Indus Valley seals), but the absence of pictorial representations of the cow in particular is curious.[184] The Bull Seal as well as the cattle

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[179] W Norman Brown, 'The Sanctity of the Cow in Hinduism', *Journal of the Madras University,* Vol 28, No.2 (Jan 1957), 29-49 in Doris Srinivasan, *Concept of Cow in the Rigveda*, Reprint (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Limited, 2017), 2.

[180] Doris Srinivasan, *Concept of Cow in the Rigveda*, Reprint (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Limited, 2017).

[181] D N Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2017).

[182] Srinivasan, *Concept of Cow in the Rigveda*, 7.

[183] Lodrick, 'Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture', 68.

[184] Lodrick, 'Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture', 65.

scenes at Bhimbetka more prominently highlight the bull, possibly due to its links to the zebu. However, the importance of the cow seems to crystallise in the sixth century CE. Though the reasons behind this importance are unclear, the poet Bharavi describes cows as 'fond mothers' showing a rise in status of the cow. The bull is still described in texts like the Rig Veda (and other subsequent Vedas) but these descriptions lack the religious fervour ascribed to the bull in previous centuries.[185]

In the Manusmriti or Laws of Manu, a text particularly important to this thesis as it also outlines the laws of caste in Hindu society, passages speak both of *ahimsa* or *non-violence* towards the cow but at the same time, also mention the slaughter of cattle. The acceptance of *ahimsa* in relation to the cow slowly gained popularity and acceptance in Brahmanical circles, but the 'references are equivocal and ambivalent, with popular practice apparently being at odds with scriptural teaching'.[186] The later epic Mahabharata (composed between 300 BCE to 300 CE) and the Puranas (350 to 750 CE) promote the sanctity of the cow, leading to the way that it is understood in modern Hindu society. As W. Norman Brown notes:

> The epic, the Puranas, and a great mass of ancillary literature express the idea of the cow's sanctity in the form which modern Hinduism accepts as orthodox, and on their authority the doctrine is so firmly fixed in dogma, whatever the case may be with practice, that it is possible for the modern authority to say that caste, rebirth, and the sanctity of the cow are the principle tenets of modern Hinduism on the popular level.[187]

The significance of the cow to the principle tenets of modern Hinduism and its appeal in these texts at the popular level highlights that the cow's links to especially the Hindu religion have always been powerful. This is why this thesis primarily analyses the cow and caste in relation to the disruption of the cow-as-image within the boundaries of Hinduism. Particularly, the

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[185] Alexandra van der Geer, *Animals in Stone: Indian Mammals Sculptured through Time* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 93.
[186] Lodrick, 'Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture', 70.
[187] W. Norman Brown in Lodrick, 'Symbol and Sustenance: Cattle in South Asian Culture', 71.

dismantling of caste oppression requires a questioning of Hinduism which, in turn, requires a questioning of the cow (in its image within Hindu doctrine).

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Ambedkar has also spoken about the importance of the cow in relation to the ostracism of certain 'broken men' in Vedic times. As Buddhism declined in popularity, Brahmanical Hinduism discriminated against the Buddhists or 'broken men' who still consumed meat, particularly cow meat. Ambedkar argues that these men eventually became the 'untouchables'. The concept of *ahimsa* which possibly originated as Buddhist philosophy was co-opted by Hinduism and applied solely to the harming of a cow. Those who did not practice *ahimsa* and harmed the cow—the broken men—were discriminated against. Therefore, here is an instance where the cow is used as a tool with which to victimise others.[188] This need to victimise reiterates the cow's central role in Hinduism and Hindu texts and doctrine.

As discussed above, visual representations of the cow were much less prominent than that of the bull. The importance of the bull is also visible in Buddhist architecture and sculpture, as well as some Buddhist painting like the wall murals in the Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra (circa fifth and sixth centuries CE), India. While the cow featured mostly in the form of domestic cattle, the bull had a significant role in some Buddhist sculpture including the Rampurva Bull Capital (third century BCE) erected by King Ashoka in the Mauryan Period, as well as humped bull motifs in relief sculptures at the stupas at Amaravati (fifth century BCE) and Sanchi (third century BCE with later additions in first century BCE). The cow, rather than the bull, makes its appearance in some of the Jataka tales painted as murals in the caves at Ajanta.[189] In some depictions, the cow is part of a herd of cattle, and in others, it enhances the

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[188] Alex George and Anand S., eds., *Beef, Brahmins and Broken Men: An Annotated Critical Selection from the Untouchables : Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd, 2019).

[189] Jataka tales are stories of the previous lives of the Buddha in human and animal form.

particular Jataka story. Some of the Jataka tales in which the cow is visible are the Sibi Jataka, the Sankhalpa Jataka, and the Mahakapi Jataka.[190] The cows depicted in these murals are not primary subjects of the story, but enhance the rest of the visualisation of the narrative. [191]

So far, we have seen the tracing of the cow and bull in ancient civilisation, Hindu texts and doctrine, and Buddhist sculpture and murals. It is evident that the bull initially held more prominence than the cow, with the cow becoming solely significant to Hindu ritual and worship by around sixth century CE and beyond as evinced by texts and poetry, as well as the popularity of epics like the Mahabharata (circa 450 CE) which established the importance of the god Krishna, and in turn, the cow. However, visual representations of the cow even in this period and beyond are few. The cow in visual culture eventually gained significance in sculpture and paintings due to its associations with the god Krishna and as the mythical Kamadhenu.

First, I will briefly explore the relationship between the cow and Krishna. Krishna, considered an avatar of Lord Vishnu, is fondly remembered and prayed to in Hinduism. He is a popular god, often depicted as blue, and as a child and a cowherd. Krishna played a significant role in securing the victory for the Pandavas in the epic Mahabharata, where he was Arjun's chief advisor (the Bhagavad Gita is composed as a conversation between Krishna and Arjun).[192] Wendy Doniger notes that the Harivamsha, composed a century or two after the Mahabharata develops the story of Krishna as a child and cowherd.[193] The popularity of Krishna and his relationship to the cow can be seen in relief sculptures at the Krishna Mandapa (Cave) (circa mid-seventh century CE) in Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, where Krishna is depicted lifting the Govardhan Mountain, alongside a prominent cow relief (see Fig.1.4).

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[190] Shivendra B Kadgaonkar, 'Faunal Depictions in Ancient Indian Art with Special Reference to Early Historic Period', ed. Pankaj Goyal, G.S. Abhayan, and Sharada Channarayapatna, *Animals in Archaeology: Integrating Landscapes, Environment and Humans in South Asia (A Festschrift for Prof. P.P. Joglekar)* 2 (2023): 520.
[191] 'Jataka Stories', accessed 6 March 2024, https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/artistic-sites/ajanta/ and Kadgaonkar, 'Faunal Depictions in Ancient Indian Art with Special Reference to Early Historic Period'.
[192] The Bhagavad Gita is a holy Hindu scripture that is part of the epic Mahabharata.
[193] See Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative,* 477-478. The Harivamsha is an appendix to the Mahabharata, which indicates that the epic did not originally consider the birth of Krishna and his childhood.

Another relief sculpture is visible at the Hoysala Temple (1120 CE with later twelfth and thirteenth century additions) in Halebedu, Karnataka, where Krishna is depicted surrounded by cattle.

The association with cows made Krishna a relatable figure and thus a popular god. Often depicted in Pichhwai and Nathdwara folk traditions as frolicking in beautiful rolling landscapes with trees, *gopis* and cows,[194] Krishna came to represent a charming god, liked by many. For instance, the Pichhwai textile of cows (see Fig.1.5) from the late eighteenth century (attributed to the Deccan region in India) highlights Krishna's 'elevation from a herder of cows to a cowherd'.[195] The use of gold and silver and the numerous cows depicted in a field of flowers shows the devotion to Krishna. In *Adoration of Krishna as Shrinathji* (c.1850), the cows once again gaze adoringly at their master, Krishna. The Picchwai tradition in itself is one that honours Krishna in his form as Shrinathji, the primary cult image of the Vallabhacharya sect of Hinduism.[196]

Krishna and his cows also made appearances in the Rajput court painting tradition like in *Krishna and the Gopis Take Shelter from the Rain* (1760) (see Fig.1.6) where the cows look adoringly at Krishna and worship him in the same way that the *gopis* do.[197] Prior to this 1760 painting, an image, again from Rajasthan in the Bikaner style, depicts a cow giving birth to a calf in the foreground, while Krishna stands holding Govardhan mountain and sheltering the dwellers of the region (see Fig.1.7). The depiction of the cow giving birth is unusual and shows

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[194] *Gopis* or *female cowherds* are popularly considered to be devotees and/ or lovers of Krishna.
[195] 'Pichhwai for the Festival of Cows | India, Deccan, Aurangabad (?)', The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 14 February 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/65576.
[196] Pratapaditya Pal and Betty Seid, eds., *The Holy Cow and Other Animals: A Selection of Indian Paintings from the Art Institute of Chicago*, 1st ed (Chicago, IL : Seattle, Wash: Art Institute of Chicago ; Distributed worldwide by the University of Washington Press, 2002).
[197] 'Krishna and the Gopis Take Shelter from the Rain | India (Rajasthan, Jaipur)', The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 14 February 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37968.

the importance that the Rajasthani painting tradition gave to the relationship between Krishna and the cow.[198]

While Krishna's relationship to cows does not form the normative understanding of the cow in India, it helps highlight the role of cows as relatable to people. It is noteworthy that the cow is used to highlight Krishna, but the cow is not worshipped unlike the cow as Kamadhenu. In Krishna's relationship to cows, we then see a coming together of the divine (as Krishna) and the earthly (as the cow).

The theme of Krishna and the cow, emerging from these earlier traditions of folk art and calendar prints, also percolated into modern and contemporary Indian art. This is reflected in the work of Manjit Bawa (1941-2008), since Bawa liked to draw from mythical themes especially relating to Krishna. In fact, Krishna was an icon that Bawa was particularly drawn to and he challenged the viewer 'to place this historical and religious playful icon within the contemporary condition'.[199] In *Untitled* (1990) (see Fig.1.8), one sees a blue Krishna lying among cows with a flute by his side. According to Delhi Art Gallery (DAG), Krishna as the cowherd God is 'simultaneously metaphysical and yet intimately material'. Krishna lies in 'cosmic sleep' and shows his place in the *aranya* or *wild spaces*, but also his engagement with the *grama* or *world*.[200] It is this bridge between the cosmos and the real world that makes Krishna particularly relatable, and in Bawa's work, the cow seems to form that bridge.[201]

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[198] 'Painting | British Museum', accessed 14 February 2024, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1960-0716-0-16.

[199] Rebecca M. Brown, 'Transformations: Art, Globalization and Cultural Politics in 1990s India', in *20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary*, ed. Parul Dave Mukherji, Rakhee Balaram, and Partha Mitter (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022), 357.

[200] See DAG, 'DAG - Manjit Bawa Untitled, 1990 Oil on Canvas 69.0" x 91.5" -... | Facebook', accessed 15 May 2023, https://www.facebook.com/DAGworld/posts/manjit-bawa-untitled-1990oil-on-canvas690-x-915-manjit-bawas-krishna-is-the-cowh/2676852288999222/ and *Manjit Bawa - Untitled, 1990*, accessed 28 July 2023, https://dagworld.com/manjit-bawa-untitled-1990.html.

[201] See Sugata Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550-1850*, Global South Asia (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019) for a study on the relationship of land to Krishna in terms of geoaesthetics. Ray details the way in which nature (the land) and its elements interact with art and religion in the Braj region where Krishna is said to rest in eternity. This is similar to Bawa's work where a relationship between Krishna and 'wild spaces' is seen.

While I discuss the cow as Kamadhenu in detail at a later point in this chapter, the representations of Kamadhenu were as popular as the depictions of Krishna and the cow. In *A Vaishnava Cosmological Scroll* (c.1850) from Orissa, one sees the figure of Kamadhenu next to the god Vishnu. This particular scroll also highlights the bull as a symbol of the order of the entire cosmos. Similarly, in another scroll from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh (c.1875), the depiction of Kamadhenu being adored by mortal on the top-right is striking.[202] While there are many other examples relevant to an understanding of the history of the cow, these are beyond the scope of this chapter. Over the next many centuries, the cow came in and out of scripture, text and representation. For instance, even against invaders from Central Asia, the Rajputs were said to have defended India and the tenets of Hinduism which included the sanctity of the cow. However, the focal point is that the cow became an image that gained significant religious prominence over many centuries, and it is its image that dominated the cow's animality. For this thesis, the cow's prominence in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century calendar prints is most significant to the challenge and critique to its image by the artists discussed here. While this section has traced a brief history of the cow and its image and highlighted some examples of this image, the remaining sections in this chapter focus more on calendar prints so as to establish the particularities of the cow-as-image that the artists are disrupting.

There is no singular reason or historical trace that establishes why the cow became a central figure of Hinduism. What I have explored above shows the varying ideas across a single religion. But these ideas were also part of other religions and texts not mentioned here. It is significant to understand that the sacredness and sanctity of the cow is not monolithic. It varies across region and religion (even sub-religion) and its multifaceted importance as a religious

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[202] Pal and Seid, *The Holy Cow and Other Animals*.

entity is what is important for the arguments and exploration presented through the later case studies of this thesis.

The Native and Jersey Cow

'Desi [Indian] cow is not a cow, she is not an animal, she is a goddess, she is a mother. Only Jersey cow is an animal'.[203] This statement was made by a *gaushala* (cow shelter) official to Yamini Narayanan when she was on her fieldwork to examine dairy politics in India. The statement reflects the story of Kamadhenu, where all cows *from* India are supposed to be manifestations of Kamadhenu and thereby linked to the divine. Cows that are *in* India but not originally Indian are not considered divine—they are 'an animal'. The development of the cow-as-image in the previous section highlighted the cow's links to Hinduism. In this smaller section, the link to Hinduism is connected to the idea of the native and the foreign cow, showing that it is only the native cow that is considered divine.

This attitude of difference between a native and Jersey cow is apparent across the Indian subcontinent. Jersey cows were brought into India at the time of Operation Flood, one of the largest rural development programmes in India started in the 1970s to increase dairy and milk production. Like in the case of Yamini Narayanan, fieldwork in the Kumaon region of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand, India, by Radhika Govindrajan, also demonstrates the differing attitudes when thinking about indigenous or native cows and cows that are foreign (the Jersey cow). The people of the Kumaon region refer to the indigenous cow as being *Pahari* (alluding to being *of the hills and mountains*) while foreign cows are referred to as Jersey cows. A simple illustration in the perception of a native Indian cow and a Jersey cow is to study milk, a primary resource that is extracted from the cow for human use. Since the explanation is once again from

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[203] Yamini Narayanan, *Mother Cow, Mother India* (Stanford University Press, 2023), 84, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503634381.

the Kumaon region, the term *Pahari* is used; however, the sentiment surrounding the *Pahari* cow is equivalent to the sentiment of all native Indian breeds. It is said that if the milk of a *Pahari* cow is consumed from a young age, the individual will grow up with values that protect the cow, as the cow takes on the role of the individual's mother by providing milk. Similarly, if the meat of a *Pahari* cow is ingested, it is a much larger sin as compared to eating the meat of a Jersey cow. Selling a *Pahari* cow for butchering is different from selling a Jersey cow. While the owner of the said cow feels complicit in the death of the animal, the same owner would rather sell a Jersey cow for butchering. The Jersey cow's lack of native breeding would ensure that the *dyavtas* or *spirits* are not angered, since it does not have the same *shakti* (divine power and virility) as a native breed.[204]

These distinctions theoretically make all the difference in the decision to protect and worship the cow. If the cows are Jersey cows, they are 'animals' and thus not regarded worthy of worship. Govindrajan refers to the comparison between Jersey and *Pahari* as being a recurring narrative in her talks with the people living there. [205] Her fieldwork experience, and that of Yamini Narayanan's, is indicative of the larger Indian sentiment regarding the protection and worship of the Indian native cow as opposed to the Jersey cow. Even today, instances of breeding and cloning 'native' cows are prevalent; these practices ensure the flourishing of 'native' breeds in India.[206] The cow explored in the next sections of this chapter is the native cow, for the cow-as-image in India is connected to the native cow and its divinity. It is this cow-as-image that has a vast history and development in India, while the cow-as-animal is unfortunately dismissed for its lack of *shakti.*

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[204] Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*.
[205] Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*, 87-125. Also see 'How Science Saved a Cow Breed Known for Sweet Milk', Times Of India, 27 February 2023, https://epaper.timesgroup.com/timesspecial/sci-tech-environment/how-science-saved-a-cow-breed-known-for-sweet-milk/1677518072028 for how 'native' cows are bred today in India.
[206] Siddharth Tiwari, 'Why India's First Cloned Cow Is a Game Changer', *The Times of India*, 21 May 2023, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/why-indias-first-cloned-cow-is-a-game-changer/articleshow/100389030.cms.

Cow, Bull and Buffalo

At this juncture, it is necessary to underline that this thesis focuses mainly on the cow but acknowledges the importance of the bull and the buffalo in the Indian context. As is shown in the research by Xenia Zeiler, Vedic texts also referred to bulls and represented them as being symbols of fertility and strength. In fact, the gods of the Vedic times like Indra are described as having 'desired bull qualities'.[207] Additionally, the slaughter and consumption of bulls for food was popular in verses of the Rig Veda. Bull reverence is seen in Vedic times, as well as in the preceding Indus Valley Civilisation mentioned earlier. From around the second century BCE, the bull started to make appearances in mythology and iconography as sacred. It is during this period that the bull vahana or vehicle Nandi ('the happy one') of Lord Shiva grew in popularity. Nandi has many origin stories and associated myths which are beyond the scope of this thesis. Still, it is imperative to note the importance of the bull in the sacrality of the Indian Hindu landscape, especially in Shiva worship. Even in the Marundeeswarar Kovil mentioned at the opening of this chapter, a Nandi statue is a prominent part of the temple complex as the temple is dedicated to Shiva.

In addition to the bull, the buffalo should also be given consideration. The devotion afforded to the cow and bull is not seen in the worship of the buffalo which, in ancient Vedic texts, does not feature as many times as cows or bulls. The cow had significant sacred associations in the Vedas, and the bull was associated with gods like Indra. The Vedic god directly linked to the buffalo is the god of death or Yama. In fact, the buffalo is considered

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[207] Xenia Zeiler, 'Benevolent Bulls and Baleful Buffalos: Male Bovines versus the "Holy Cow" in Hinduism', in *Animals As Religious Subjects: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Celia Deane-Drummond, Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser, and David L. Clough (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013), 130, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ed/detail.action?docID=1224227.

Yama's vahana. Even though Vedic texts do not indicate buffalo worship, there is evidence of buffalo worship even today among tribes like the Todas and Kurubas.[208]

The deified buffalo presents as an example of the multifaceted nature and intersection between a more upper caste Hinduism and one considered tribal. The buffalo is shown as ambivalent; it is represented as heroic but with a dangerous side. This is most apparent in the example of Mhasoba, a buffalo deity worshipped by peasants in western and central India. Originally a cattle deity, Mhasoba eventually was reconstructed and transformed from a 'folk' and non-urban deity to a 'sanskritized and brahamanical' deity.[209] Later, Mhasoba was even merged with the Shiva pantheon with the buffalo background being concealed and with Mhasoba becoming more aligned with a god like Shiva. The ambivalent status of the buffalo is also seen in the sacrificial nature of the animal for the buffalo is often sacrificed to appease some goddesses in contemporary India.

The buffalo's most common association in Hinduism is as Mahisasura. This particular depiction gained popularity from around the fourth century CE onwards. The figure first appears in the epic Mahabharata. The goddess Durga was finally created to destroy this demon or asura who went by the name Mahisa. Several depictions of this story exist across India, but interestingly, all present Mahisasura in buffalo form. The message is clear: Durga, the preeminent Hindu goddess, vanquishes evil which is personified in the form of a buffalo.

The depiction of the Mahisasura can be seen in a chromolithograph from the early twentieth century that featured the Goddess *Ashtabhuja Devi* (see Fig.1.9) attacking two men identified as butchers who had just decapitated a 'cow'. As Christopher Pinney has shown, the original chromolithograph was in fact considered an 'anti-cow killing document' by the ruling

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[208] Zeiler, 'Benevolent Bulls and Baleful Buffalos: Male Bovines versus the "Holy Cow" in Hinduism'.
[209] Zeiler, 'Benevolent Bulls and Baleful Buffalos: Male Bovines versus the "Holy Cow" in Hinduism', 137.

British rather than linked to a buffalo.[210] The British felt that it would anger the Muslim community (who were stereotyped as butchers in narratives of the time). However, the Ravi Varma press owner who had issued this chromolithograph insisted that this was a rendering of a story from the Mahabharata which is the story of the slaying of Mahisasura. Despite the differing opinions in interpretation, an agreement was reached wherein the Ravi Varma Press agreed to issue a new chromolithograph with a 'black' cow that appears more like a buffalo, thus reflecting the demon in the story of the Mahabharata. The Press also agreed to remove the blood on the sword of the two butchers, thereby separating them from the apparent killing of the cow (see Fig.1.10). The two versions of this calendar image, the first of the cow, and the second of a 'black cow' similar to a buffalo, suggests that while the cow can incite violence as an image associated with Hinduism, the buffalo is associated with a demon, and therefore its depiction is not likely to cause riots.[211]

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd has in fact suggested that the black-skinned buffalo is discriminated against because of its colour. Despite buffalo milk being the most consumed in India today, it is a ban on cow slaughter that is demanded. Shepherd argues that the protection of the cow is because of her white skin, while the buffalo is not afforded the same protection, because of their colour as well as their associations in Vedic times with death. Thus, according to Shepherd, the Dalit-Bahujan community is likened to the buffalo in their lack of access to basic rights and the cow to upper caste Brahmanism, where the cow becomes symbolic for the Brahmin.[212] In this thesis, I concentrate on the cow as emerging as a normative image linked to upper caste Hinduism and as a symbol of the Brahmin, since the artists I examine disrupt this particular nature of the cow's association. While this section has not focused greatly on the

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[210] Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 110.
[211] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 110-112.
[212] Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2018).

gendered aspect of the cow versus the bull and the buffalo, the next section will illustrate the gendered notion of the cow as seen in her image as the divine Kamadhenu and the mother Gaumata. Gender, though acknowledged, is not a dominant framework used in the analysis here.

So far, we have looked at the development and emergence of the cow-as-image from the cow-as-animal. We have seen how ancient depictions and texts/scriptures have helped engender notions of Hinduism in association with the cow. We have also seen that the native or Indian cow is the cow that carries the divine power. Foreign or Jersey cows do not hold the same value. The ascription of the divine status to the cow is also distinct from the sacrality accorded to the bull and buffalo. The next few sections focus on the visual culture of the cow in calendar prints from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as a few examples of contemporary art in relation to the cow, so as to situate the cow within the frameworks of religion, politics and caste.

The Two Kamadhenus

The visual culture of the cow, predominantly late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century calendar art, has helped develop the cow as an image of divinity and motherhood. These calendar images have helped cement the cow's status as an image of larger Hindu ideologies and build a nationalism surrounding the cow. In many ways, the cow becomes a symbol of Hinduism in the way that a symbol signifies something else. However, as I mentioned in the Introduction, I use the word image to approach the cow in a more expansive manner that includes ideas of symbols, images, metaphors, and icons, and to think through the layered and complex relationship between the cow and human in and through visual images.

In these calendar images, the cow is mostly depicted as Kamadhenu, whose legend is elaborated at the beginning of this chapter. In a calendar image titled *Five Forms of the Female*

Deity (1978) (see [Fig.1.11](#)), Patricia Uberoi notes the distinctions between the two popular representations of the cow as Kamadhenu within the same frame. Though this image was printed later than the others discussed in this chapter, it highlights a difference in the depictions of Kamadhenu that had developed with the rise of print culture in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India. In this image, two iconographic forms of the cow are seen alongside a trinity of Hindu goddesses (Uma or Durga in the centre, flanked by Lakshmi and Saraswati). The cow on the lower left is seen as Gaumata or Jagat Mata (Mother of the Universe). Its body encompasses gods, sacred mountains and rivers. The lower-right side cow image is of Kamadhenu or the wish-fulfilling cow, with the face of a young woman, the body of a cow, bird's wings and a peacock tail. This version of the cow is usually seen in prints in idyllic Himalayan landscapes and blessed by Shiva and Parvati. Typically, this Kamadhenu has milk gushing from her udders over a Shiva *linga*, but this particular print shows that even *Gaumata* has milk pouring onto a *linga*.[213] According to Indian art historian C. Shivaramurti, the difference between the two depictions of the cow is because the 'zoomorphic version' is ascribed to the deity or goddess Sri (Lakshmi) while the other representation is taken from a section of the Mahabharata.[214]

This zoomorphic version also has resemblances to the Buraq, an 'equine riding animal' that is white, has two wings, the face of a human, and the flanks of a horse.[215] The Buraq is said to have been ridden by Prophet Muhammed on a nocturnal journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, as well as on his ascent to heaven called *miraj*. Uberoi notes that viewers of calendar prints of Kamadhenu often mistook Kamadhenu for Buraq. These viewers claimed that the '*basic* image' of Kamadhenu was, in fact, of Buraq. Uberoi further elaborates that the

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[213] Patricia Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?": Dilemmas of Nationhood in Indian Calendar Art', in *Beyond Appearances?: Visual Practice and Ideologies in Modern India*, ed. Sumathi Ramaswamy (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2003).

[214] C. Shivaramurti in Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 208.

[215] Chandra, *The Tale of the Horse,* 8.

amalgamation of the Buraq/ Kamadhenu image 'suggests a common vocabulary and aesthetic of representation' where an 'ambiguity' of forms of horse and cow are enabled and Hindu visual tropes do not dominate.[216] The combining of horse and cow to negate a solely Hindu association that usually existed with the representation of the cow alone further underscores that the cow, not any other animal, was of prime importance to Hindu doctrine.

Despite the difference between the two iconographic representations of Kamadhenu as Gaumata and the hybrid form, the term 'Kamadhenu' is often used interchangeably to signify both representations of the cow. In both, she is associated with divinity, and especially in the one where she is Gaumata, she is linked to motherhood in India.[217] Even though this print was circulated later than the earliest images of Kamadhenu in calendar art, it shows that two iconographic developments of Kamadhenu took place.

Cow-as-Image

The growth of nationalist sentiment in India ties in with 'print capitalism'.[218] As Benedict Anderson argues, print capitalism is one of the material contexts in which nationalism can come into being as a modular form. A rise in mechanical reproduction played a significant role in propagating print culture, where an 'imagined community' was created and a space of knowing another through print rather than person emerged.[219] The mobilisation of local and national groups was successful due to progress in technology and its rapid dissemination of news and print media (images). Though print culture and the dissemination of printed pamphlets and other text-based media was already prominent, the entry of printing presses like the Raja Ravi Varma Press offered new modes of conceiving and engaging with mass-produced

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[216] Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 208.
[217] Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 206-209.

[218] Benedict Anderson in Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 106.
[219] Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, 229.

images rather than text-based pamphlets. Particularly, chromolithographs like that of Kamadhenu discussed in the previous section, enabled a material context wherein frames of the visual, the political, and the religious, could come together. Of note here is that India was still under colonial rule at this time and the building of nationalist symbols and patriotic ideals was essential in bringing together an Indian community that could fight against colonial rule. In building the cow image, the calendar images presented the cow as a 'proto-nation' that embodied Hindu ideologies to fight against Western powers.[220] These Hindu ideologies meant that India was equated to a Hindu nation, rather than a nation that was secular and consisted of many religions other than Hinduism. Therefore, in becoming a 'proto-nation', the cow was associated with a nation (India) as Hindu, thus creating an internal divide of Hindu versus those who were not Hindu. The British were also instrumental in amplifying the polarised divide between communities over the cow. Communalism, caste divisions and class divisions were already rife in India when the British arrived, but they interfered and used these already entrenched divides to their advantage. In the case of the cow, the main divisions lay in religion, specifically between Hindus and Muslims.

Both Christopher Pinney and Patricia Uberoi discuss one of the first and earliest prints of the cow.[221] In this image, the cow depicted as Kamadhenu contains gods within her body. Developed by P. C. Biswas from Calcutta, the print indicated an association through visuality of the cow to Hinduism. The Ravi Varma press drew from Biswas' image and helped instrumentalise the Hindu iconographic aesthetic of cow visuals. They issued two chromolithographs, one of which was *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay* (c.1912) (see Fig.1.12)*, that helped embed the cow as a symbol of the nation, the divine, and the mother.[222]

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[220] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 107.
[221] See Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 106-112, and Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 206-213.
[222] For this thesis, I concentrate on image/ prints generated by the Ravi Varma Press. Though there are many other printing presses in India from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, my focus on the Ravi Varma Press images has largely been due to the reactionary nature of these images in relation to the cow.

In *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay (the Cow with 84 Deities)*, a direct link of the cow to Hinduism is visible. This print also shows the strength of the cow image in terms of inciting violence and clashes between religious groups. Here, the cow's body enshrines eighty-four Hindu gods. According to the Uttara Parva of the Bhavishya Purana, every part of the cow's body houses a god; some are described below: 'the sun and moon are in its eyes... The Aswini twins are in its ears. Rudra and Brahma are in the tips of its horns…The four oceans are in its stomach. The Ganges is in the portion covered by its tail. Bhudevi and Lakshmi reside in its behind…In its bones are hills…Lord Vishnu resides in its entire body'.[223] A figure clad in yellow labelled *Dharmaraj* is seen motioning with his hands to a demon-like figure labelled *Kaliyug*.[224] As suggested by Pinney, the attached narrative commentary to the image helps interpret it as an image meant to circulate a message about anti-cow killing. The commentary above the *Kaliyug* figure reads *he manusyaho! Kaliyugi mansahari jivom ko dekho* ('mankind, look at the meat-eating souls of the kaliyug') while the commentary above the *Dharamaraj* figure reads *mat maro gay sarv ka jivan hai* ('don't kill the cow, everyone is dependent on it').[225] These words in association with the image show that the cow is of prime importance to 'everyone' since 'everyone is dependent on it'. However, 'everyone' excludes those 'meat-eating souls' linked to the *Kaliyug*. So then one can ask: who are these 'meat-eating souls'? Most often, scholars like Pinney have interpreted these souls to be Muslims, and Uberoi has suggested that these souls could also be lower caste Hindus like Dalits.[226] Interestingly, a revision was made to this version of *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay* (see Fig.1.13), as the colonial ruling governments felt that such an image would cause large-scale rioting. The new image

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[223] 'The Sacred Animal', *The Hindu*, 5 July 2023.

[224] The label of this demon figure links to *Kaliyug* as the *Age of Darkness* in Hinduism. This is supposed to be the period we are living in presently which is full of conflict.

[225] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 108.

[226] Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 112.

removed the *Kaliyug* figure, thus detaching itself from a targeted attack in the name of the cow.

This revision is evinced as being at the request of the colonial rulers by the following memo:

> In addition to the inflammatory harangues delivered to meetings of Hindus, [wandering ascetics] have distributed throughout the country pictures of the cow, of a kind calculated to appeal strongly to the religious sentiment of the people. One of them, for instance, depicts a cow in the act of being slaughtered by three Muhammadan butchers, and is headed 'the present state'. Another exhibits a cow, in every part of whose body groups of Hindu deities and holy persons are shown, being assailed by a monster with a drawn sword entitled the 'Kali Yug' but which has been largely understood as typifying the Muhammadan community.[227]

Though the colonial powers have interpreted the 'Kali Yug' figure as 'typifying the Muhammadan community', I suggest that these images require to be understood in line with Uberoi's suggestion that the 'Kali Yug' figure could also be Dalit. Meat eating is very much a caste marker: those who eat meat, especially the flesh of a cow, are discriminated against for this association. Calendar prints like *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay,* in addition to being looked at as prints that incited violence among Hindus and Muslims, require to be revisited to include a narrative that examines these caste markers. Such an examination would highlight the implicit caste violence in these prints, which is different to the pronounced divisions between Hindus and Muslims that are clearly depicted here. For instance, Jyotindra Jain shows a print from circa 1940 titled '*Wish-cow'* by the Ravi Udaya FAL Press, Ghatkopar, Bombay (see Fig.1.14), that once again has the figure of 'Kali Yug'. While Jain interprets this image as clearly targeting Muslims and describes the print as having messages that could incite radical divisions between Islam and Hinduism,[228] this 'Kali Yug' figure could once again be indicative of lower caste Hindu groups that killed and ate the cow's flesh. Overall, the message of these prints was that the cow required to be protected against those who killed the cow and ate its flesh.

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[227] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 108.

[228] Jyotindra Jain and National Gallery of Modern Art (New Delhi, India), eds., *Indian Popular Culture, 'the Conquest of the World as Picture'* (Kolkata: Ajeepay Press, 2004), 98-100.

The protection of the cow in India played a role in politics and the growth of nationalist sentiment. The Cow Protection movement can in fact be described as having two significant phases: the urban which was primarily in Punjab and the rural which was for the most part in Bihar. The urban phase alluded to ideological conflicts, specifically disputes between Hindus and their Muslim and Christian counterparts. The rural phase spoke more to the caste conflicts that permeated (and still permeate) the Indian subcontinent.[229] In general, the linking factor between the urban and the rural in terms of protection was related to the consuming of the cow as meat, and the killing of the cow in general, both associated with other religions like Islam and Christianity, but also to non-upper caste communities like Dalits.

One of the origins of this cow protection is the Arya Samaj,[230] set up in the nineteenth century by Dayanand Saraswati. In addition (and connected) to the Arya Samaj, Dayanand Saraswati also established a *Gau Rakshini Sabha* or *Cow Protection Society.* The cow served as a unification strategy for the Arya Samaj and Dayanand Saraswati since the cow brought Hindus together in the name of community service, cow reverence and cow protection. However, cow protection was often a source of repeated friction with the Muslim community as they consumed beef. Interestingly, while cow protection is now largely associated with right-wing ideologies in India, it was not initially successful in unifying political parties who otherwise identified as right. Each party had their own ideas of cow protection, with some being more extreme.[231]

Even though the Arya Samaj was set up during colonial rule, the British did not initially take issue with the Arya Samaj and its activities. They noticed a coming together of highly educated people who propagated 'discouragement of ceremony, heterodoxy on caste, and

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[229] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 106.
[230] The Arya Samaj was founded by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. It believes strongly in the Vedas and was and still is a Hindu reform movement.
[231] See Walter K Andersen and Sridhar D Damle, *The RSS, A View to the Inside* (Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2018), 188, for a discussion of lynching.

concern for social and educational reform'.[232] However, one of the messages of the Arya Samaj was that the eaters of beef (the British) were rulers in this evil time and that the Indian community was required to come together in the name of protecting the cow to resist this rule. This coming together against the British was suggested in tandem with protecting the cow from Muslims and Dalits. Initially, the British did not link the Arya Samaj's statements against them with any sort of cow propaganda. As *gau rakshini sabhas* or *cow protection institutes* were set up increasingly in metropolitan cities like Calcutta and Bombay, the British began to realise the links between the Arya Samaj, the cow, and politics.

Cow protection enabled the Arya Samaj to create a dialogue amongst Hindus pan-India and unite them against the British as well as against Muslims and non-upper caste Hindus who ate beef. Since the British did not first take issue with the Arya Samaj, the Arya Samaj was able to spread the idea of cow protection in both urban and rural areas. This widespread idea was also significantly made popular through calendar imagery and prints being easily available and entering daily discourse. Particularly, as noted by Kajri Jain, the calendar prints 'actualized a nationalist cultural imaginary' as they became available to all classes of people, including an audience that was not required to be literate, rich, or male to enter a space of nationalist participation and agenda.[233] Additionally, since these images of cows largely came from the 'Ravi Varma' Press, a balance between 'fine art' and calendar imagery became apparent, due to Ravi Varma's recognition by both colonial powers and local residents as a renowned artist and a 'pan-national yet vernacular synecdoche'.[234]

In addition to calendar prints, the Arya Samaj's Dayanand Saraswati had published *Gokarunanidhi;* its purpose was said to 'rouse Hindu feeling against Muslims and

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[232] Peter Robb, 'The Challenge of Gau Mata: British Policy and Religious Change in India, 1880–1916', *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (April 1986): 293, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00000846.

[233] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 107.

[234] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*, 106-108.

Christians.'[235] The cow was to emerge as symbolic of this Hindu feeling, and in turn a symbol of the nation or Hindu *rashtra.* As Nicolas Jaoul points out, symbols (political) often emerge from an official realm but also from initiatives of political parties and social organisations.[236] The insertion of Cow Protection into the quotidian lives of people ensured that the cow became a microcosm of all things divine.

The Gita Press' *Kalyan* magazine was also instrumental in helping cow images reach middle-class homes. Their idea was that the cow was a 'rallying symbol for the mobilization of the Hindu community.'[237] Ritualistic, devotional and economic ties were the main forces behind validating the role of the Gita Press' engagement in cow agitation. In 1945, the Press sought to put together a variety of writings that discussed religious, social, economic and scientific measures to protect the cow in a collection called *Gau Ank.* The *Gau Ank* managed to bring in economic writers who spoke of the cow as an economic asset that would bring about national pride and create harmony between Hindu and non-Hindu communities. It also included scientific facts and the importance of mixed farming (which used the cow) and cooperative dairies. This inclusion of methodical fact cemented the *Gau Ank* as having verifiable information, provable by statistics and scientific measure, and not just an ideological narrative written by Hindu nationalists.[238] The *Gau Ank's* contributions even included Mahatma Gandhi's views that India's prosperity was linked to the cow. In fact, Gandhi's views on the cow are best summarised in such passages:

> Mother cow is in many ways better than the mother who gave us birth. Our mother gives us milk for a couple of years and then expects us to serve her when we grow up. Mother cow expects from us nothing but grass and grain. Our mother often falls ill and expects service from us. Mother cow rarely falls ill. Our mother when she dies means expenses of burial or cremation. Mother cow is as useful dead as when alive.[239]

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[235] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 106.
[236] Jaoul, 'Learning the use of symbolic means', 99.
[237] Charu Gupta in Akshaya Mukul, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* (India: Harper Collins Publishers, 2017)*,* 290.
[238] Mukul, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India,* 289-316.
[239] Gandhi in Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 17.

Essentially, Gandhi believed the cow to have a strong affiliation to motherhood. He connects this to economics and uses that to suggest that the cow must be protected.[240] In line with Gandhi's views on the cow as mother, the *Gau Ank* also underlined that the cow is reminiscent of an ideal Hindu woman as an image of motherhood and a gendered metaphor of Gaumata. In fact, Charu Gupta elaborates the status of Gaumata in her paper 'The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India: "Bharat Mata", "Matri Bhasha" and "Gau Mata"' (2001) and shows the cow's importance in India as a mother of the nation.[241] The symbolism evoked through the cow as a mother reflects an emotional appeal of nationalism. The cow, considered a mother to all Hindus as well as a mother of a Hindu identity and nationality, is called forth as a symbol to charm men into protecting the nation for they are in turn protecting their mothers. The men are also convinced into thinking that the cow is linked with the idea of building a strong nation as opposed to a weak nation—the strength of men comes from the milk and *ghee* of the cow. There is an understanding among men that if there are fewer cows, men will grow weak from the lack of nutrition from this dairy product. Therefore, the cow must be protected to ensure her population remains intact to be able to provide nutrition for the men. In turn, men feel elated in 'protecting' a female object.[242] Like Gupta, Sumathi Ramaswamy also contends that nationalism is embedded in protecting motherhood since motherhood is portrayed as the primary identity of the Indian woman.[243] This protection of motherhood is, like Supurna Banerjee has argued (drawing from Jashodhara Bagchi), 'a symbol of patriarchal control over the notion of womanhood'.[244]

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[240] Also see Supurna Banerjee, 'Nationalism of Exclusion: Gaumata and Her Unholy Sons', in *Caste and Gender in Contemporary India: Power, Privilege and Politics*, ed. Supurna Banerjee and Nandini Ghosh, South Asia edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2019), 157.

[241] Charu Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India: "Bharat Mata", "Matri Bhasha" and "Gau Mata"', *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 45 (2001): 4291–99.

[242] Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India', 4295-4297.

[243] Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) in Banerjee, 'Nationalism of Exclusion: Gaumata and Her Unholy Sons', 162-163.

[244] Banerjee, 'Nationalism of Exclusion: Gaumata and Her Unholy Sons', 162-163.

Peter van der Veer explores the reasons behind cow protection and divides these into four categories. I see parallels between van der Veer's reasons and the iconography of the cow in calendar prints. First, as noted by van der Veer, the primary reason for cow protection is that the cow is significant to Brahmanical rituals where the cow is seen as akin to the mother (Gaumata) and a fulfiller of all wishes (Kamadhenu). One can see a reflection of the cow as Kamadhenu in most calendar prints where the cow enshrines eighty-four gods within its body, embodying literal divinity by the presence of the gods within her frame. Second, van der Veer suggests that cow products or emissions are considered sacred such as dung, milk, urine, curd and butter. These are mixed together to form *Panchagavya* which helps in the 'purification' of an individual. The cow requires to be protected so that these materials can be in abundance. Again, there is a clear link between materials from the cow and her 'protection' in some calendar images: in *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay,* the cow's materials like milk are shown as significant to her protection (one chromolithograph even has a phrase that reads 'drink milk and protect the cow'). The third reason behind cow protection put forth by van der Veer is that the wish-fulfilling nature of Kamadhenu is linked to the god Krishna, and in turn, protection. This is especially noteworthy as Krishna was a cowherd in his youth and spent ample time herding (and protecting) cows. Last, van der Veer posits that the cow is equated to being a mother or Gaumata as a symbol of family and community—her protection reiterates patriarchal authority, and in turn mirrors the power of patriarchy in an ideal Hindu state.[245] While the calendar images do not specify gender roles in cow protection, I interpret the Dharmaraj figure in *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay* as a male figure throwing up his hands to protect the cow or mother.

Overall, as van der Veer indicates, the primary reasons for cow protection are in relation to the cow-as-image in Hinduism. However, the protection itself, though suggestive of the cow

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[245] Peter van der Veer in Mukul, *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India,* 290.

in association with only Hinduism, also attempted to democratise this association by including human figures from other religions in the calendar prints. For instance, In *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay*, Hindus, a Parsi, a European and a Muslim are shown accepting milk from a milkman with a slogan that reads 'drink milk and protect the cow'.[246] The evidence of different religions is seen in the sartorial choices for each human figure—for instance, the European wears a waistcoat and top hat, and the Hindus are shown as a group of men who wear markers of being upper caste on their foreheads.[247] The visibility of a Hindu caste mark on the forehead is again an implicit suggestion that these prints were meant to ensure that those who were from lower caste communities were ostracised for their links to the cow. In addition to this, we have not examined the role of the milkman: who is he? Communities accepting milk from him could indicate that he is not a Dalit, for interactions with Dalits were minimised so as to ensure upper castes were not 'polluted'. While a detailed study of each figure that is enshrined by the cow and is around the cow is beyond the scope of this chapter and thesis, it is clear that this calendar print was made to be exclusively Hindu in its message. Perhaps a rethinking of the iconography in such prints would be helpful in understanding that caste and its links to the cow are not just visuals in the contemporary moment; caste markers were present in visuals like calendar prints in earlier times. This would then show that the cow has been used in its image to separate upper caste Hindus from both Muslims and lower caste communities like Dalits over a long period.

Narrative commentary like 'drink milk and protect the cow' often accompanies prints. The commentary suggests only one interpretation of the image, leaving little room for alternative explanations. In the case of this particular image, there is a suggested notion of inclusivity of all religions (Hindus, Muslims and Parsis) and races (European) in relation to the cow. As I have indicated, this notion requires to be interrogated. Christopher Pinney has already

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[246] See Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 129 and Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 107.
[247] See Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 210. She too alludes to the forehead caste markers.

questioned the 'putative democracy' of these images by considering the calendar print as a development from the artist Raja Ravi Varma's own painting titled *Milching a Cow* (n.d.).[248] In Ravi Varma's painting, a lady is seen milking a cow with a small figure beside her, identified as being Hindu. In later versions of Ravi Varma's painting that take on the form of calendar prints, the child is transformed to Krishna and the lady to his mother, Yashodha.

The popularity of Krishna and his relationship to cows, as discussed earlier in this chapter, helped nurture a fondness for Hinduism in the public realm. Therefore, the transformation of a general painting of a mother and child milking a cow (as depicted in Ravi Varma's original *Milching a Cow)* to figures in calendar prints clearly identified as Yashodha and her child Krishna places the calendar print within a particularly Hindu divine landscape and makes this print appeal to the public with its inclusion of Krishna. Additionally, like Pinney states, this 'undermines the putative democracy of figures representing Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians',[249] similar to the undermining of this 'democracy' of religions and races in *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay.* It also paves the way for communalist interpretations since this image is now solely linked to Krishna (in other words, Hindu) worship.

The association of the cow to a Hindu pantheon can be seen even in woodblock prints (see [Fig.1.15](#)) from around thirty years prior to *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay.* The woodblock print shows Bharat Mata milking this 'wish-fulfilling cow' or Kamadhenu and distributing her milk to Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, or Christian, showing a suggested putative democracy through milk, but undermining this democracy by ensuring the cow's body only contains Hindu gods.[250] Other prints of the time also developed from this image. For instance, *Jagat Mata Go-Laxmi (World Mother Cow of Good Fortune)* (1885) (see [Fig.1.16](#)) shows a female figure engaged in

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[248] See Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 107. The title of this work is in accordance with Pinney's description.
[249] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 107.
[250] Neumayer and Schelberger, *Bharat Mata*, 40-41.

a cow *puja* while Bharat Mata or Mother India milks the cow. [251] The receivers of the milk once again are meant to highlight a putative democracy as a Hindu, Parsi, Muslim and even British boy hold up their cups.

As illustrated above, the cow and its protection are primarily linked to Hindu doctrine, and the calendar prints helped circulate this message under colonial rule. The Cow Protection movement helped ignite a spark in terms of protecting the cow for its role as a mother and divine being. This protection has extended to the politics beyond Indian independence in 1947, as well as instances in society today. The conflicts that surround the cow's protection are numerous and vary. I will outline some instances below that show the controversy surrounding links to the cow in both politics and society.

The Cow as Political Image

The Indian National Congress symbol of a mother cow and calf in the 1970s became a case of debate. Originally, the Congress Party had apparently requested approval for a mother and child symbol from the Election Commission, but the Commission had instead allowed them to use their second choice of a mother cow and calf (see Fig.1.17). However, a section of the court proceedings of a 1971 case against Indira Gandhi (former prime minister of India) shows that the use of this symbol was contested on the grounds of it being a religious and a national symbol. In fact, as Prashanth Bhushan notes, it was argued that the Akhil Bharatiya Ram Rajya Parishad (another political party in India) had asked for the use of a similar symbol in the 1952 elections but was refused by the Election Commission who stated that 'no object having any religious or sentimental association, for example, a cow, a temple, a National Flag, a spinning wheel, and the like are found in the list of approved symbols'.[252] The court was then moved on

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[251] *Jagat Mata Go-Laxmi (World Mother Cow of Good Fortune)*, 1885, Lithograph, watercolor (hand-colouring), selectively applied glaze, Sheet: 12 × 16 in. (30.5 × 40.6 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art.
[252] Prashant Bhushan, *The Case That Shook India: The Verdict That Led to the Emergency* (Gurgaon, Haryana, India: Penguin/Viking, 2017), 53.

these grounds and on account of Indira Gandhi's Congress having used a 'religious' symbol though it was not allowed. Other instances of court proceedings like the case in the Supreme Court of M. H. Qureshi v State of Bihar were highlighted to show that even earlier the cow had been deemed a religious symbol. Mahatma Gandhi's views on the cow were also used in court to support the cow's links to Hinduism; Gandhi considered a basic tenet of Hinduism to be reverence for the cow. His book *Go Seva* or *Service to the Cow* reflected his views and was used in the court proceedings. Ultimately, the court proceedings concluded that the Congress symbol of the 'cow and calf' was ambiguous and in that ambiguity, it was 'impossible to say that the symbol of the "cow and calf" was not a religious symbol'.[253]

The Congress Party's use of the cow and calf shows that the cow is linked to the symbol, and in particular, political symbols in India. This symbol use falls into the larger category of what I define as the cow-as-image. The decision by the Congress to use a cow and calf link to the development of the cow-as-image in history, especially calendar art. The court proceedings against the Congress Party's use of this symbol highlight that the cow, in its image, is constantly safeguarded.

Caste and the Cow

While the example of the Congress Party cow and calf symbol shows an instance of legal disagreement about the cow, disagreements are often outside the legal system in the present day. A flogging incident at Una, Gujarat, in 2016, illustrates a bias against Dalits and their association with the cow. Seven Dalits were attacked by forty upper caste men under the pretext that they had killed a cow in order to skin its carcass for leather. The perpetrators of this attack identified themselves as *gau rakshaks* in widely circulated videos of the attack. In these videos,

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[253] Bhushan, *The Case That Shook India*, 54.

they claimed to have been angered by the desecration of the Hindu holy cow. The Dalits were tied to the back of a vehicle, dragged around, and beaten with sticks and iron rods.[254]

As an act of resistance against the Una incident, Dalit groups held a Dalit Asmita Yatra (Pride or Identity Procession) to take a stand against the imposition of working on cow carcasses. They instead wanted land to be provided for their livelihood.[255] Their campaign slogan used the sacred nature of the cow as *Gaumata* and read 'Your mother, you bury her.' Cow carcasses were left to rot in public spaces (like outside the police commissioner's house) in order to show that 'untouchable' labour would not engage with a dead cow and its associations anymore.[256] The slogan and the act of leaving cow carcasses in public spaces is indicative of a reclamation and rewriting of the meaning of the cow for Dalits. Even a year after this flogging, protests raged with a cow made from the plastic found in the stomach of cows being displayed on a truck and driven through the town in Gujarat (see Fig.1.18). This

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[254] See The Wire Staff, *"*Dalit Family Stripped, Beaten As 'Gau Raksha' Vigilantism Continues," *The Wire,* July 13, 2016, https://thewire.in/politics/dalit-family-stripped-beaten-as-gau-raksha-vigilantism-continues, Damayantee Dhar, "One year on, 'there is no justice' for Una Flogging Victims," *The Wire,* July 7, 2017, https://thewire.in/caste/a-year-after-the-una-dalit-flogging-incident-the-sarvaiya-family-still-waits-for-justice and Damayantee Dhar, "Two Years Later, Una Flogging Victims Attacked Again," *The Wire,* April 29, 2018, https://thewire.in/caste/una-flogging-incident-victims-attacked-again. The Una incident has been covered in the press extensively. *The Wire* has put together a comprehensive summary of the incident, starting with 2016 and a follow up of the incident in 2017 and 2018.

[255] See Sukhadeo Thorat, *Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny* (India: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2009) for a thorough analysis of demographics and state-level studies relating to social and economic indices. In rural India, land is considered one of the most important assets which signifies both economic and social status. There is extreme landlessness among Dalits. In 1982, 70.11 percent of rural Dalit households were landless or near-landless.

Also see 'The Context of Caste Violence', *Human Rights Watch,* Accessed: July 20, 2020. https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/india/India994-04.htm. Here, Balakrishnan, Chairman, Tamil Nadu Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes says: 'The caste system is an economic order. It prevents someone from owning land or receiving an education. It is a vicious cycle and an exploitative economic arrangement. Landowning patterns and being a high-caste member are co-terminous. Also there is a nexus between [being] lower-caste and landlessness... Caste is a tool to perpetuate exploitative economic arrangements.'

[256] Shivani Kapoor, "'Your Mother, You Bury Her': Caste, Carcass and Politics in Contemporary India," *Pakistan Journal of Historical Studies* 3, no.1 (2018): 7-10.

was to emphasise that cows were dying from poisoning rather than at the hands of Dalits as propagated by the *gau rakshaks.*[257]

The incident at Una created outrage across India. The Dalit Asmita Yatra was one example of a direct visual response to the incident. A similar visual response is seen in artist Prabhakar Kamble's performance *Human in Una* (2016) (see Fig.1.19). Kamble (b.1986) is a conceptual artist and curator who lives and works in Mumbai, India. His art is influenced by Ambedkarite aesthetics, a notion that Y. S. Alone used in his satellite exhibit at the Kochi Biennale (mentioned in the Introduction) where the world is free from Brahmin and other upper caste notions of modernity. In *Human in Una*, Kamble can be seen clothed in white and standing bent over with five white sacks on his back. Kamble's donning of white clothes is indicative of people's ignorance towards caste. According to him, 'they see everything as white'.[258] This ignorance reflects Alone's concept of protected ignorance where upper caste norms dominate understanding in the public sphere. The five sacks represent the varna system. Generally, there are only four varnas, but Kamble has included what he terms the *Atishudra varna.*[259] The burden of caste is also what is represented by the sacks—when he was younger, his school teacher used to punish him by making him bend over with a weight on his back. He is also surrounded by a whip and black powder, placed carefully in sight for the audience to use in whatever way they would like to interact with him. Kamble's aim in allowing audience interaction with black soot and a whip was to make himself the victim. He placed himself in the role of the Dalit men who were beaten for skinning the dead cow. In the video recording of the performance, audience members are seen throwing the black powder on him, smearing his face, and beating him with the whip. The audience seem to take on the role of the *gau rakshaks*

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[257] Aarefa Johari, 'Metal Cows and Attacks: Ten Months since the Una Assault, Cow Politics Still Stalks Gujarat's Dalits', Text, Scroll.in (https://scroll.in), accessed 30 August 2020, https://scroll.in/article/837738/metal-cows-and-attacks-ten-months-since-the-una-assault-cow-politics-still-stalks-gujarats-dalits.

[258] Prabhakar Kamble, interview by author, August 23, 2021, transcript with author.

[259] Atishudras are those who are considered *avarna* or outside the *varna* (caste) system.

and 'create stains' on Kamble's white clothed body, ensuring continuity in the ignorance towards caste.[260] Additionally, no audience member removes the sacks from his back. People are seen adding things, thereby adding burden, but nobody 'removed' the burden of caste from his back.[261] The performance ends with Kamble rising up and loudly expressing a triumphant 'ha', hands raised in victory. The burden of caste in the form of the sacks has now fallen off his back.

The implicit evocation of the cow in Kamble's work stands out. The politics of the cow are indicated in the flogging incident itself where the cow is the reason for which the Dalit men were subjected to such extreme forms of violence. It is interesting that though Kamble does not actively depict the cow in his performance, despite its relation to the incident, his bent figure in white with sacks on his back resembles a white cow with a hump. Additionally, the title of the work itself says 'human' in Una. Therefore, the relationality of the cow and human is not in terms of the cow-as-animal but rather, it is the cow-as-image that is at the forefront. Kamble also uses the inherent imagery that the cow evokes in his piece *Uttarand* or *Stacked Vessels* (2022) (see Fig.1.20), a series that uses different symbols to provoke ideas of caste discrimination. Here, Kamble uses stacked terracotta pots to resemble the four-tiered caste system. He arranges the pots with the smallest on top, mimicking the caste hierarchy in terms of population numbers in India, where, in reality, only a small proportion make up the upper castes. The pots sit atop a pole which is attached to the feet of agricultural workers. In one of the structures for this series, a cow image is visible on top of the feet and pots. This use of the cow reflects that the cow's life is more important than that of humans in India.[262]

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[260] Prabhakar Kamble, interview by author, August 23, 2021, transcript with author.
[261] Prabhakar Kamble, interview by author, August 23, 2021, transcript with author.
[262] Sumesh Manoj Sharma, curatorial statement on Prabhakar Kamble's *Uttarand,* displayed in Akademie der Künste, Pariser Platz, 12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, 11 June 2022 to 18 September 2022, https://12.berlinbiennale.de/artists/prabhakar-kamble/.

The work of Savindra Sawarkar (b.1961), a contemporary Indian artist who identifies as Dalit, in many ways epitomises the relationship of the Dalit and the cow, as viewed by most upper caste Indians.[263] Sawarkar was born in Nagpur, Maharashtra. He grew up in a Dalit colony of Mahars with his family having strong Ambedkarite leanings. Sawarkar grew up hearing Ambedkar's life stories from his grandmother; this Ambedkarite influence is seen in his art in terms of its iconography.[264] The artist clearly states that he is challenging the notions of caste in India: *caste ki jo notion hai…vo mein challenge kar raha hoon* (the notion of caste in India…I am challenging that).[265]

In Sawarkar's paintings *Untouchable with Dead Cow I* and *II* (see Fig.1.21 and 1.22)*, a figure is seen carrying a bovine animal on their shoulder. While it might not be immediately apparent that this figure is a Dalit, the title of the work uses the term 'untouchable'. As mentioned in the Introduction, 'untouchable' is the term that was formerly used to refer to Dalits. Since the figure has now been explained as representing a Dalit, the question of the 'dead cow' from the title comes to the forefront. Historically, the Dalits' associations with the cow have been within the framework of death: they were either skinning the cow carcass for leather or eating the cow carcass as food sustenance. In fact, ancient Indian evidence shows that often Dalits were left with nothing to eat but a rotting carcass of the cow after it was killed in sacrifice and first consumed by upper castes. Therefore, a twofold narrative of importance underlies Sawarkar's image: first, the historicity of a Dalit's engagement with the cow is seen by the depiction of a cow carcass on the Dalit man's shoulder as he walks in the present day, and second, Sawarkar takes charge of this Dalit history in his inclusion of a lantern, showing hope and illumination for the Dalit despite the burden of caste, indicating an individual's small

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[263] Some of my descriptions of Savi Sawarkar and his art are drawn from my conversation with him on 1 March 2021.
[264] Ambedkar was a Mahar by birth. Sawarkar's family were part of Ambedkar's 1956 conversion to Buddhism.
[265] *Dalit Struggle and Art* (Indian Cultural Forum, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9jukcz-Izs.

act of resistance.[266] Sawarkar's iconography usually includes symbols like the lantern and the cow, as well as other symbols like the crow, the Manusmriti, and even the colour blue as a signifier of caste. Historian Saurabh Dube calls Sawarkar's body of work a 'veritable "iconography" of *dalit* imagination and radical art'.[267] Dube points out that Sawarkar's work goes beyond a mere representation of the past and present, and instead Sawarkar 'conjoins the experiential realism…with the revealing terms of a forceful expressionism'.[268] The 'experiential realism' is the reality of the nature of the Dalit association to the dead cow, which is rendered by Sawarkar as a 'forceful expressionism' of his own experiences with the burden of caste.

As seen in Sawarkar's images and Kamble's performance, the cow's relationship to the Dalit community has been shaped by the caste system. Particularly, due to the Dalits' association with the dead cow as well as being considered outside the *Chaturvarna* system, Dalits have been discriminated against. It is important to understand that Dalits are not a homogeneous group of people and practice amongst themselves their own version of hierarchical societal structures, especially in matters of marriage and sharing of food.[269] However, in relation to the cow, upper castes in India consider the Dalits as uniform.

The dead cow is an indicator of pollution and impurity, and in their link to the cow carcass for leather and food, Dalits have been and are still discriminated against. Since the carcass is linked to death, this connection in turn leads to links with malodour, decay, dirt and rot. Shivani Kapoor argues for the consideration of 'the carcass as a specific kind of malodorous

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[266] See Saurabh Dube, 'A Dalit Iconography of an Expressionist Imagination,' in Tartakov, *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery,* 257, for a biography and summary of Savi Sawarkar's work.

[267] Saurabh Dube, 'Unsettling Art: Caste, Gender, and Dalit Expression', *Open Democracy*, 1 August 2013, 2.

[268] Dube, 'Unsettling Art: Caste, Gender, and Dalit Expression', 4.

[269] See Teltumbde, *Dalits: Past, Present and Future,* for an understanding of the internal caste and class hierarchies among Dalits. For example, the Mahar sect of Dalits is said to have sixty-four sub-caste hierarchies within their society, each having their own set role in community order.

political subject.'[270] This is particularly interesting due to the way the Dalit Asmita Yatra used cow carcasses to fight back against the *gau rakshaks* after the flogging incident at Una, ensuring that the carcasses were used as political subjects to fight against societal oppression.

Kapoor also points toward the arrangement of cities where sanitarian ideas compel a separation between animal and human worlds wherein the animal carcass (with its stench of death) is separated from the spaces where humans normally live. These humans are mostly upper caste and reside away from the violence associated with the carcass, as well as the violence associated in the name of the carcass, or in other words, caste. A clear boundary lies between the killing of animals and public spaces; slaughterhouses are always placed outside functioning cityscapes. Animal bodies (carcasses) are a threat to morality and spirituality, and it is in the light of this that death and caste are a moment of 'great ritual pollution.'[271] The absence of seeing the visual of the animal in death is therefore highlighted. In its absence, malodour or smells of rot and decay become the association to the economy of death and it is this malodour that is linked to Dalits since they are the handlers of these carcasses. Living away from these spaces, upper castes ensure the continuation of an invisibility of caste and death.

As handlers of cow carcasses, Dalits often work in the leather trade. Several artists now use this association with leather to highlight a positive relationship between the Dalit and the cow. For instance, Madhukar Mucharla (b.1995) has turned to the artisans from his community (Madiga) to learn the leather tanning process and then incorporate this into mainstream contemporary Indian art. Mucharla attempts to subvert the discrimination traditionally associated with leather by using leather as an artistic material to create an Ambedkar portrait. Like Sawarkar, Mucharla then creates his own iconography in relation to the cow.[272]

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[270] Kapoor, '"Your Mother, You Bury Her"', 5.
[271] Kapoor, '"Your Mother, You Bury Her"', 19.
[272] Nirmala Biluka, 'Looking from the Margins : The Art Practice of Madhukar Mucharla', *Hakara* 14 (21 August 2021), https://www.hakara.in/nirmala-biluka/.

Essentially, it is the cow in its dead form that most upper castes associate with the Dalit. Within the legal structure of India, many arguments ensue over the punishment for someone who has slaughtered a cow or sent a cow to be slaughtered. A popular notion is that the death penalty should be administered for such acts. Indian history and law are interspersed with requests to seek a nationwide ban on cow slaughter. In fact, just after India became independent of colonial rule, seventeen million signatures that demanded a national ban on cow slaughter were collected.[273] To look at the historicity of the laws of the cow and its inclusion in the Indian Constitution would be to view lengthy iterations and corrections that are beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, a key debate on nationalising a ban on cow slaughter at the time the Indian Constitution was formed is relevant. Ambedkar was a leading figure in shaping the Indian constitution. Since he was the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, he attempted to ensure that Dalit ideologies were given equal rights in this document. If a ban on cow slaughter had been passed as a legislature, it would have been an immediate discrimination against the Dalit and Muslim communities of India. From the Dalit point of view, a ban on cow slaughter would not only outlaw the consumption of beef, a central component of their diet, but also reduce jobs and leave numerous people unemployed as one of the main professions of the Dalit community is their work with leather. Finally, as shown in Article 48 of the Constitution,[274] the decision on the ban on cow slaughter was left to each state in India. The ban was included in the Constitution as a Directive Principle of State Policy, emphasising the role of the individual state in decisions on cow protection.[275] One of the primary reasons for leaving the decision to ban cow slaughter to individual states was to address

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[273] Andersen and Damle, *The RSS, A View to the Inside,* 176.

[274] See Article 48: 'Organisation of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry', Constitution of India, accessed 20 June 2023, https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-48-organisation-of-agriculture-and-animal-husbandry/.

Article 48 states: '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.'

[275] For example, there is a beef ban in Maharashtra but not in Kerala.

economic development. Nationalising a ban on the slaughter of cows would not advance economic development as the meat and leather industries alone contribute a large part of the GDP of the country. A Reuters report claims that sixteen billion dollars in sales are from the meat and leather industry.[276] A paradox then emerges: on the one hand, cows require to be protected, but on the other, their slaughter is required for economic viability.

To combat and deal with all issues surrounding the cow, the current Indian government (the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) constituted the Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog or the National Cow Commission in India, therefore formally emphasising protection of the cow as Kamadhenu. The Commission was formed in 2019, two months before the Lok Sabha election.[277] This ensured that the public was aware that one of the BJP's core issues was cow protection, something that gained them voter favour, especially amongst Hindu masses. The Rashtriya Kamdhenu Aayog is headed by a former BJP Minister of Parliament, Dr Vallabh Kathiria, who is from Rajkot, Rajasthan. Its plans include educating Indian people about cow welfare through tourism, agriculture, and school education, as well as introducing 'Kamdhenu nagars' and 'Kamdhenu chairs' in universities and housing societies.[278] Vallabh Kathiria stated that its role is to review the laws of the state relating to cow protection and to ensure that all cow slaughter is banned nationwide.

Currently, India's cow population exceeds that of other countries. In 2019, the total number of adult female cows was around eighty-one million.[279] As mentioned earlier,

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[276] Andersen and Damle, *The RSS, A View to the Inside,* 181.

[277] The Lok Sabha, or House of the People, is the lower house of the Indian Parliament. The representatives in the Lok Sabha are elected directly by the people.

[278] Bhasker Tripathi, 'Cow Commission will review all state laws for gau-raksha: Vallabh Kathiria,' *The Business Standard,* September 21, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/cow-commission-will-review-all-state-laws-for-gau-raksha-vallabh-kathiria-119092100883_1.html

[279] See 'Livestock Population in India by Species (Million Numbers)', *National Dairy Development Board,* Accessed: 15 July 2020, https://www.nddb.coop/information/stats/pop for a breakup of livestock populations over the years from 1951 onwards.

Operation Flood, one of the largest rural development programmes in India started in the 1970s, helped grow India's cow population by ensuring India became the largest producer of milk and dairy products in the world. While the programme is criticised on account of bringing in foreign breeds and destroying the existing Indian ones, its success in increasing India's cow population is undisputed. In addition to a focused programme to increase the population of India's cows, the agrarian use of cows by India's large agricultural sector has also helped safeguard cow numbers. Likewise, the cow's role in ritual and religion has also protected its population.

In the scholarship on the cow elucidated above, several associations of the cow to caste are presented. This takes the form of especially cow protectionism, where the cow is protected against non-upper caste Hindus like Dalits. Not only is this present in the rhetoric of Indian cow protection, but also in visuals like *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay,* which highlights Dalits as demon figures of the *Kaliyug*. Today, in India, particular emphasis of cow protection sentiment currently appears to be in North India, especially the Cow Belt.[280] The question of how the cow is protected then arises. As mentioned earlier, several *gau rakshaks* or *cow protectors* take it upon themselves to protect the cow. Often, this protection turns violent and involves acts of lynching and flogging. Primarily, these acts of violence take place against Muslims and Dalits, as they are equated largely with consuming the meat of the cow as well as skinning the cow carcass for the leather trade.

This protection of the cow from non-upper caste Hindus was first propagated by calendar images like *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay* which clearly illustrated a demon like figure of *Kaliyug* that was representative of Muslims and Dalits. Additionally, safeguarding the cow against those who are not upper caste Hindu is also pertinent. As seen in the requirement to

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[280] The major states of the Cow Belt are Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The reason for this name is due to the fact that in these states the cow is revered by Hindus in an almost extreme way.

amend the *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay* image, the message of cow protection was significant in early twentieth-century India, and is possibly where today's cow protection sentiment stems from. Even though I have only detailed the flogging at Una in 2016 that is an instance of violence in the name of the cow, other examples of such violence take place across India regularly.[281] The cow's status as divine and mother is at the root of cow protection. In fact, this status is a result of the cow-as-image rather than the cow-as-animal. The cow continues to be viewed more as an image in contemporary times, and it is this cow-as-image that creates divides amongst caste groups and religious sects. The cow-as-animal is then placed in opposition to the cow-as-image, though the image developed from the importance of the cow-as-animal in ancient India.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the history of the cow and showed that its image is the normative story permeating India. The links of this image to history and Hinduism have been outlined with a particular focus on calendar prints and their role in developing the cow as an image of divinity and motherhood. While the section on caste is brief, the associations of the dead cow to Dalits has been highlighted. Though the case studies discussed in the following chapters place caste at the forefront of their analysis, I presented only a brief discussion of caste and the cow in this chapter because the aim here was to show the cow-as-image permeates several aspects of India and Hinduism. Through this thesis, the recurring phrases cow-as-image and cow-as-animal will be used to highlight the main arguments. In each of the case studies that follow, these particular phrases become significant to the primary concerns outlined.

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[281] See Harsh Mander, *Partitions of the Heart: Unmaking the Idea of India* (Gurgaon, Haryana, India: Penguin/Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2018)*,* 78-108 and IndiaSpend's report on lynching for more instances of lynching in the name of the cow. Such an instance that became national news was the 2017 lynching of Pehlu Khan, a dairy farmer of Muslim heritage.

I have outlined the various convergent and divergent tendencies that have influenced the power relations between cow and human. As conjunctures are a site for intervention that help shape social change and thought, the next chapters speak to this intervention and mark a 'new conjuncture' as presented by the four artists analysed. By referring to the older and historical images of the cow, the 'new' image of the cow that will be explored in the case studies of the thesis will 'become legible against the ground of previous visual genealogies, both acknowledged and repressed'.[282] These previous visual genealogies of the cow-as-image are acknowledged and repressed in the artists' rejection of Hinduism and its links to the cow (as Wendy Doniger notes, 'even in rejection, there's Hindu influence'[283]). In the following case studies, the associations of caste and the cow to Hinduism are often disrupted through the artists' use of the cow in various forms—drawing/ painting, performance, the digital space, and material. The artworks examined bring together the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal to critique and challenge caste oppression that has taken place in the name of the cow (in its image).

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[282] Iheka, 'Human Meets Animal, Africa Meets Diaspora', 165.
[283] Wendy Doniger, *On Hinduism* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 489.

CHAPTER TWO
THE PAINTED COW: G. CHANDRU

To this day

have you reared a pair of bullocks?

…………………………………

What, in the end, do you know

my friend, but to say 'don't eat beef'?

('Beef, Our Life' by Gogu Shyamala) [284]

An image sketched in pencil of a Kamadhenu-like figure (the divine embodiment of the cow) appeared on my phone via WhatsApp, a few hours after my interview with artist and sculptor, G. Chandrasekaran (here on referred to as Chandru) (b.1951) in August 2022. Chandru, now retired, had spoken to me at length earlier that day, about his views on art and caste. Chandru mentioned that the pencil sketch he sent me had been inspired by our conversation and encapsulated some of his ideas on the cow and the way it is seen today. In the sketch, which I will refer to as *Matchbox Kamadhenu* (2022) (see Fig.2.1), a cow or Kamadhenu-like figure appears in the centre of an object that is likely to be a glass box. The Kamadhenu-like figure has voluptuous breasts and a kind of armour encasing her body. A wing, two tails, and two long braids also decorate her being. A lotus is visible above the Kamadhenu-like figure, alongside English lettering that reads 'Rusi' which means 'taste' in Tamil, Chandru's mother-tongue. Other English phrases also embellish the front-facing side of the glass box, and read 'Bharata Mata', 'Cultivation in India', and 'For export only'. The right side of the box once again shows the lotus, above which appear the words 'Om & IIT'. Below the lotus on the right, a price tag also accompanies the image, and reads 'MRP 100'.[285] Two versions of this drawing

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[284] Gogu Shyamala, 'Beef, Our Life/ by Gogu Shyamala', *Anveshi* (blog), 10 May 2013, https://www.anveshi.org.in/beef-our-life-by-gogu-shyamala/.

[285] Some of the writing on the box is analysed later in this chapter. However, the lotus and the word 'Om & IIT' are not delineated. In this respect, please note that the lotus is the symbol of the current ruling party (the Bharatiya Janata Party or the BJP) in India. 'Om & IIT' indicate an upper caste Brahmin ideology—om is an invocation of Hinduism, and IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) is a premier engineering institution that is in the news with regard to prevalent caste practices today.

exist. The difference in the two versions is primarily in the appearance of the box. One image shows a box that is similar to a matchbox, which has a comparable role to calendar prints in India's visual culture. The art on matchboxes has commemorated historic events, celebrated people and depicted animals, among many other things. The second image illustrates a glass box which encases the Kamadhenu-like figure. For this chapter, I will distinguish between the two drawings by referring to them as *Matchbox Kamadhenu* and *Glassbox Kamadhenu* (2022) (see Fig.2.2). Both images illustrate that Kamadhenu, in her divine form as the cow, is a commodity that is shaped by religion and politics.

The image shared on WhatsApp by Chandru was not his first sketch of a Kamadhenu-like figure. Previously, an image titled *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* (2003) (see Fig.2.3) had appeared alongside an article by Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd in *The Caravan* magazine.[286] The image shows the figure of a cow that resembles Kamadhenu, standing alone on a wooden pedestal. The Kamadhenu-like figure resembles Kamadhenu representations in calendar images that align with the tradition of Kamadhenu in connection with Goddess Lakshmi, as discussed in Chapter One. The face of the woman with red lips, a *pottu* or red forehead mark, and outlined eyes, as well as the golden wings in Chandru's image also stem from this calendar tradition of Lakshmi. However, the peacock tail featured in Kamadhenu depictions of typical calendar art differs from Chandru's Kamadhenu-like figure where a cow's tail is featured, from under which drops of *saanam* or cow dung fall on to the pedestal. At the rear end are also the cow's udders, coloured gold. More gold is discernible at the end of the long braid on the side of the Kamadhenu-like figure's face, as well as her body which is decorated in gold jewellery. As mentioned in the title, Chandru's image depicts a 'stitched-up' body of the Kamadhenu-like

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[286] See Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'. The title of Chandru's work is drawn from *The Caravan* article. The work does not seem to have an official title. The *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* piece that appeared in *The Caravan* magazine article was in fact redone in watercolour on request by the current owner, S Anand, editor of Navayana Publications, as the original in acrylic was lost or given to someone else.

figure, seen by the seams binding the mid-section of the figure's flank. This particular stitched-up nature is a departure from the traditional image of Kamadhenu featured in calendar prints. The accompanying caption of *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* best encapsulates Chandru's purpose in making this image. Chandru intended to emphasise that the cow is an animal and not just a divine creature, therefore showing the divine Kamadhenu performing actions of the cow-as-animal. In my interview with Chandru, the 'fictional' and 'imagined' *divine* cow was emphasised, for Chandru felt that portraying a divine creature in its right as an animal enabled the viewer to clearly see that divinity was imagined.[287]

Another image by Chandru that appeared in *The Caravan* was the watercolour *Triptych* (2001) (see Fig.2.4).[288] In this painting, Chandru constructs a vertically stacked three-part division and 'evolution' of the cow.[289] The top-most panel shows a red line drawing of a large bovine figure with horns. Inside this large figure are a series of curves rendered in a single line stroke, extending from the mouth of the bovine to its tail. Small horns and a single ear are also visible. The background of this panel has two more creatures drawn using line, but they are smaller than the larger figure which occupies the front of the panel. It is unclear if the other two figures are bovines or other animals (and could perhaps be deer). This panel has an appearance of a cave painting, similar to those at Bhimbetka caves, or even Lascaux in France. The second panel shows a decorated bovine, standing on a pedestal. The pedestal resembles the one that the Kamadhenu-like figure stands on in *Stitched-up Kamadhenu.* Here, the bovine figure is decorated and a small yellow line appears in the central part of the figure's flank. This patterned bovine closely resembles Nandi *vahanas* or vehicles that are placed at the entrance to Lord Shiva temples. The bovine figure also appears similar to deities that are used in temple

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[287] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.
[288] See Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'. Once again, the title is taken from *The Caravan* article.
[289] Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.

processions, largely again at Shiva temples. The third panel frames an abstract version of the cow, with the shape of the cow's head highlighted in white. The cow is painted in an almost expressionist manner, with colours red and yellow standing out against a black background. This panel is strikingly different in its tone from the other two more muted panels. The cow figure is distorted, although the overall assemblage of different features (like the cow head, and the lines that indicate udders) makes up a cow's body. The altered placement of its various parts as well as the predominantly black tone speaks to a certain darkness that seems to evoke a violence that the other two panels do not. Each panel has a single red dot, which serves as a visual motif that runs through all three panels. According to *The Caravan* magazine caption, 'all three panels are connected by the presence of a red dot and a yellow horizontal bar', which the magazine alludes to as a *tilak.* [290] The allusion to wearing a *tilak* is not obviously emphasised, but the semiotic orientation of three lines and a dot representing a *tilak* is not unusual in an Indian context. Additionally, the *tilak* itself is more visible in upper caste spaces, and Chandru's inclusion of a subtle *tilak* formation perhaps indicates a devotional space. Often the placement of *tilaks* is to mark the body as a temple and showcase which Hindu sub-faith one belongs to. As in the case of *Stitched-up Kamadhenu,* the accompanying caption to *Triptych* best summarises the message conveyed by the image. The caption suggests that an evolution of the cow-as-image has been the result of human constructions of the cow-as-image, while the cow-as-animal remains 'an indifferent subject'.

Though these images were illustrations appended to Shepherd's text, they did not seem to complement the ideas about beef consumption expounded as the main idea of the article. As I discussed in the Introduction, Shepherd does not actively engage in analyses of the artworks,

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[290] A *tilak* is a mark worn on the forehead. It very often relates to caste and religious markers. In the Shaivite tradition, the *tilak* is often depicted as three dots and a line. People wearing this distinctive marker are immediately recognised and associated with the Shaivite Brahmin caste. The interpretation of the *tilak* in Chandru's work is from Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.

and the only descriptions of them are in the captions which show Chandru's intention of highlighting that the cow is an animal and not a Hindu religious deity.

I suggest that this intention stems from Chandru's relatedness to the cow. Even though Chandru's career has been largely in Chennai, his upbringing was in rural Tamil Nadu. As the son of shepherds, he grew up taking care of cattle with his grandmother. He expressed to me in his interview that his direct relationship to shepherds often results in critics equating his upbringing to his cow representations. However, his relationship with the cow is along the lines of its animality—he was aware of cows as animals as they were his playmates, but at the same time, he was also aware that as animals, cows provided him nourishment in the form of food (beef) and financial support (from the milk sold). He spoke fondly of a snack *(sudathal)* his mother used to cook for him before he went out to play that consisted of grilled/roast beef with salt.[291] This reliance on the cow and seeing the cow through its entire life cycle, as a playmate, friend, *and* food, shows Chandru's relatedness to the cow.

Images by other visual practitioners from the same environment show a similar relatedness to the cow. For instance, photographer Jaisingh Nageswaran's image shows the relatedness of cow and human (see Fig.2.5).[292] In Nageswaran's image, a little boy is seen milking a cow. The joy that comes through in this photograph, part of Nageswaran's *Down by the Mullaperiyar* photo series, embodies the very relationship between human and cow in India, wherein the cow is a playmate and friend, a companion to the growing up of the child, yet also a source of nourishment in the form of food like *sudathal.* Nageswaran has also grown up in rural Tamil Nadu and is currently involved in making a film on Chandru's life and his contributions to art and culture.[293]

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[291] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.
[292] I discussed the concept of relatedness in the Introduction. I draw some of these ideas from Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies, Beastly Love in the Himalayas*.
[293] Jaisingh Nageswaran, conversation with author, September 16, 2022.

Both Chandru and Nageswaran's relationship to the cow recalls the idea of relatedness as a compelling framework with which to understand the already layered entanglements of humans and animals. Relatedness most often involves a sort of kinship and belonging to familial settings: Chandru and Nageswaran relate to the cows of their childhood in terms of friendship and family. My reason for comparing Chandru and Nageswaran in terms of their relationship to the cow is to illustrate that this relationship exists in the present day. Even though Chandru is from a different generation to Nageswaran, society in India (and in both their cases rural Tamil Nadu) pays heed to the cow as a friend, someone to look after through her entire lifecycle.

The evident relatedness between Chandru and the cows he has cared for is reflected in his artworks. Chandru renders the cow in his work to show it exactly as it is: a cow. The images analysed in this chapter emphasise that the cow is first an animal, rather than the way it is understood through the notion of protected ignorance as a Hindu religious trope. While Indian Hindu religious sentiment definitely nurtures ideologies that anthropomorphise the cow into mother and goddess as an image, Chandru's work is meant to disrupt this anthropomorphism and show the cow-as-animal. I see his intent in prioritising the cow-as-animal over the cow-as-image as rooted in his relatedness to the cow. His first-hand experience of the cow's animal nature directly links to his portrayal of the cow-as-animal, even if it is an unconscious choice. Therefore, the relatedness that Chandru's relationship with the cow embodies is key to reading his art since the purpose of the art is embedded in Chandru's understanding that the cow is an animal and not a religious trope.

In the images by Chandru, the figure of the cow is central. The cow figure, especially in *Matchbox Kamadhenu* and *Stitched-up Kamadhenu,* immediately links to Kamadhenu of the calendar art traditions. But how do we so conclusively arrive at this link to Kamadhenu? Why is this figure not just a cow, or a woman, or a hybrid form? Nowhere in his WhatsApp message

to me, or in his Facebook post, did Chandru mention that the image shared was of Kamadhenu. Yet, my immediate association of the image to Kamadhenu indicates that a bovine figure rendered in the style that Chandru has drawn it, calls forth an alignment with Kamadhenu figures popularly depicted in calendar prints. Similarly, the title *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* was given to *The Caravan* article image since it mirrors Kamadhenu imagery because of the depiction of the cow-woman hybrid, the wings, and the gold, all linking to the popular divine form of the cow represented in numerous calendar prints.[294] Therefore, Chandru is likely assuming that viewers, especially those from India, will instantly recognise his depiction of Kamadhenu without any requirement for additional information. An alternative view might be that Chandru does not mean to show Kamadhenu at all and instead only wants to show a cow in its animal form. But the instant association of cows (in the way that he has rendered them in these images) with Kamadhenu highlights the biases toward viewing cows in an Indian context.

Drawing from my interview with Chandru, I will consider his relatedness to the cow and his larger framing of caste by analysing his 'painted cows'. I do not explore Chandru's career as a sculptor, though he has installed some well-known sculptures around Tamil Nadu, and even in Sweden. Most notably in the context of caste, the Madras High Court houses Chandru's sculpture of B. R. Ambedkar.

In the images discussed through this chapter, Chandru disrupts hegemonic portrayals of the cow-as-image and instead attempts to highlight its animality. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Chandru was one of the few artists in India to identify as Dalit. Yet caste is not the only focus of his message in the images discussed in this chapter. In fact, he intends to highlight the animality of the cow. While he speaks of his caste experiences freely, his reflection on 'freedom' from social hierarchies has resulted in an objectivity to his approach to

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[294] It is unclear if the titles were given to the images by the magazine, or by the owner of these paintings (S. Anand).

caste. In disrupting the cow-as-image, he implicitly questions caste and its links to the cow, but his explicit portrayal of the cow is to mirror his intent in underscoring its animality, resulting in his own aesthetic ecology. Therefore, an approach that looks at caste studies and animal studies enables a reading of Chandru's work and places it in the 'borderland' of the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal.

This chapter first looks at Chandru's lineage as an artist who has studied in the Madras School of Art. The legacy and style of this school is explored and connected to Chandru's artworks. Second, the chapter attempts to understand the cow as commodity in Chandru's work, with a particular focus on the idea of the cow, beef export, and the leather trade. Third, the animality of the cow is contextualised in Chandru's pieces, with an examination of his emphasis of the cow's inherent nature. In conclusion, the chapter brings together these different strands to underline the coming together of cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal. This chapter argues that Chandru's emphasis is on the animal nature of the cow so as to challenge the religious tropes of its associated image.

Notes on Style and Legacy

Chandru's art practice was shaped by an art education that was founded during the period of colonial rule. Though Chandru was born in 1951 and attended the Government College of Fine Arts (originally the Madras School of Art) only in the 1960s and 1970s, his link to colonial art education is in terms of a style that brings together Western concepts in art like abstract expressionism and Indian iconography like Kamadhenu. Chandru's artworks, which are the focus of this chapter, are rooted in this pedagogy and subsequent lineage that eventually developed the Madras Art Movement and, in turn, Chandru's style. Chandru also headed the Government College of Fine Arts, Chennai, for a period, and this role as a teacher reflects a colonial pedagogy of studying art, where Western and Indian art are studied together.

A brief history of the Madras School of Art, which became the Government College of Fine Arts, is necessary to contextualise his works. Since the Madras Art Movement emerged from the Madras School of Art, the value in tracing a brief history of colonial pedagogy and emergent styles help situate Chandru's own visual expression. First established in 1850 under colonial rule, the Madras School of Art (as it was then known), is the oldest surviving institutional set-up by the British in India. It was renamed the Government College of Fine Arts in 2000 and is currently known by that name.[295] The Madras School of Art, and the schools that were subsequently set up around urban centres in India (for example, the Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay), helped develop a colonial art education at the end of the nineteenth century. Each school's history is different and developed different trajectories in terms of style and movement.[296] The Madras School of Arts, though the oldest surviving member, has received the least consideration in scholarship on South Asian art. Both Partha Mitter and Tapati Guha-Thakurtha have significantly analysed colonial art education in India. Mitter makes mention of the Madras School of Art and its independent development as well as its contribution to a colonial art education practiced and taught in schools around India. However, a focused history of the Madras School of Art is not a running theme in his entire book.[297] Guha-Thakurtha largely traces art in Bengal during colonial and nationalist periods and addresses art education in this context.[298]

In her thesis on art education in colonial times, Deepali Dewan traces the history of the Madras School of Art and its establishment. She details the story of its first principals, and the

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[295] Ashrafi S Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', in *20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary*, ed. Parul Dave Mukherji, Rakhee Balaram, and Partha Mitter (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022), 202–17. I draw significantly on Ashrafi Bhagat's scholarship for this section, as the writing on the Madras School of Art and Madras Art Movement is limited.

[296] Deepali Dewan, 'Crafting Knowledge and Knowledge of Crafts: Art Education, Colonialism and the Madras School of Arts in Nineteenth-Century South Asia' (Ph.D., United States -- Minnesota, University of Minnesota), accessed 25 May 2023, https://www.proquest.com/docview/304703664/abstract/25750F6267AC4789PQ/1.

[297] Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge [England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[298] Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*.

development of an art curriculum that comprised of Western traditions like 'fine art' and Indian craft traditions like pottery that were part of the 'industrial' art department. In essence, she illustrates that to analyse South Asian art history as a discipline, the importance of an art education rooted in the colonial period must also be understood.[299] In a recent publication, Ashrafi Bhagat also traces the history of the school and relates it to the Madras Art Movement, which developed in tandem with the institution. The Madras School of Art's first Indian principal was D. P. Roy Chowdhury (1899-1975), a practicing sculptor of repute. His *Triumph of Labour* is on the coastline of Chennai's Marina Beach today. After D. P. Roy Chowdhury, K. C. S. Paniker (1911-1977) took over as principal in 1957, and it is under his guidance that the Madras School of Art entered its 'modern' phase.[300] To understand Chandru's work, the lineage and pedagogy established by Paniker and his students, one of whom was A. P. Santhanaraj (Chandru's own teacher), is significant.

Even with the Madras School of Art's colonial legacy, it was an important site for the development of modernism in South India. When Roy Chowdhury was principal at the Madras School of Art, there was a focus on the romantic English landscapes of J. M. W. Turner and John Constable. Roy Chowdhury was disinterested in Euro-American modernist thought that was being developed at the time. A shift is observed in Paniker's time as principal. Since Paniker was interested in European styles, an emphasis of these styles in the pedagogy at the Madras School helped influence 'regional modernity', which in turn inspired the growth of the Madras Art Movement.[301]

Paniker's own work reflected 'regional modernity' in that it combined folk and tribal culture with art, thus 'synthesizing the traditional with the modern'.[302] However, Paniker

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[299] Dewan, 'Crafting Knowledge and Knowledge of Crafts'.
[300] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 202.
[301] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 202.
[302] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 203.

eventually moved away from this with his *Words and Symbols* series (1963) where emphasis was instead placed on signs, symbols, horoscope writing and Malayalam script, all positioned together as a form of a regional identity that embodied 'Madras'. As noted by A. S. Raman, Paniker used these elements outside of their traditional ritual context.[303] Paniker's regional modernity is seen in Chandru's works in his depiction of Kamadhenu as outside ritual and the use of the cow as an image or symbol. Additionally, Rebecca Brown proposes that Paniker's work also depicted 'a narrative in progress',[304] which suggests a development on the canvas for the viewer. This is not to say that his work represented a story. Rather, it presented a 'story to be told…in which each story connects with the previous telling, extending and reshaping it without losing the connection to the past'.[305] That is, Paniker's work draws from ancient symbols, but is then presented as distinct from the original context of these ancient narratives. The element of a 'narrative in progress' is visible in Chandru's *Triptych* where he invites viewers to negotiate the construction of the image of the cow as a story that connects to the past.

In due course, Paniker's work relied on a linear abstraction. Paniker's move to abstraction, even though not 'pure abstraction', foregrounded this idea for the Indian tradition. Paniker's rejection of a pure abstraction was to maintain a connection to the realities around him. The decorative quality that dominated Paniker's work, drawn from the craft traditions around South India, became an integral part of the Madras Art Movement. Artists were particularly inspired by the decorative quality of line found in murals like Lepakshi (Andhra Pradesh) and Thanjavur (Tamil Nadu). Artists also saw this use of decorative line in temple sculptures in the regions surrounding Madras like the Pallava sculptures and temples at

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[303] A.S. Raman, 'The Madras School - Modes of Abstraction', in *Indian Art: An Overview*, ed. Gayatri Sinha (New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 2003), 140.
[304] Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980*, 85.
[305] Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980*, 85-86.

Mahabalipuram, or the Chola temples again in Thanjavur.[306] Chandru has also imbibed a linear abstraction and extensively used the decorative quality of line in his work. For instance, his *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* clearly has links to Kamadhenu temple sculptures and murals. Similarly, a linear abstraction is visible in the third panel of *Triptych* where the figure of the cow is still clearly discernible in its abstraction.

In general, one of the main features that made up the aesthetic of the Madras Art Movement was the decorative quality of line that was inspired by temple sculptures and murals. This was a defining characteristic of the aforementioned regional modernity which combined traditional practices with European styles. As noted by Ashrafi Bhagat, like the Madras Art Movement, other groups around India like the Bengal School also combined European aesthetic with regional practices like Indian miniature painting traditions as well as Japanese wash techniques. However, the context of the Bengal School was in the early twentieth century when India was still under colonial rule, while Paniker's influence on the Madras Art Movement's aesthetic was in a post-independent India. On the other hand, groups like the Progressive Artists' Group (or the Bombay Progressives), founded in the year of Indian independence in 1947, were influenced by European styles like Cubism and Surrealism, but did not combine these movements with traditional practices of art and craft.[307] The aesthetic of the Madras Art Movement combined the decorative and regional modern approach that drew from tribal and craft traditions with European style to create its own distinct regional modernity different from other groups around India. Two broad categories of figuration and abstraction

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[306] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 206.

[307] Ashrafi Bhagat in Blessy Augustine, 'An Exhibition on Madras Art Movement', *The Hindu Businessline*, 2 August 2019, https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/watch/modernism-in-art-madras-style/article28794373.ece.

can be identified within the Movement, with the regional references to art and craft changing according to the sensibility of the individual artist.[308]

The influence of A. P. Santhanaraj, an artist from the Madras Art Movement, is evident in Chandru's work. Santhanaraj was Chandru's teacher at the School of Art. Santhanaraj 'robustly explored the versatile line as an expressive tool' and drew from the mural traditions of Thanjavur in South India as well as murals in Ajanta, Maharashtra.[309] He often used line to completely dissolve the figure to a level of abstraction. Interestingly, line also came with a colonial legacy. A collection of books from the 1850s on decorative ornaments derived from temple art and sculpture was part of the library at the Madras School of Art. Many students and teachers like Paniker, Santhanaraj, and others, made line a distinctive feature in their work. Therefore, line came to be a typical identity for the Madras Group.

Even though Chandru is a post-Madras Movement artist, his style imbues line as a tool of expression. As Gary Tartakov describes, there is an 'intense fixation on line and the properties of the fluid medium, drawn and painted across a flat surface'.[310] This fascination with line is evident in the works analysed here. Tartakov further describes Chandru's line and style and compares it to the 'modern master' of Chennai or Mumbai:

> There is the ceaselessly calligraphic engorging of a line until it is about to burst, which is then squeezed down to a thread and extruded thickly in a personal handwriting as unique as any modern master of Chennai or Mumbai. There is the impetuous spreading out of bright colours, without fear of contrast or simplicity, and there is the modernist propensity to mix the traditional figure with startling innovations.[311]

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[308] See Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 205-206. The Madras Art Movement was also intricately linked to the setting up of the Cholamandal Artists' Village, a commune for artists to work and share ideas. Cholamandal Artists' Village was Paniker's idea. It is essential to see the Cholamandal Artists' Village and the Madras School of Art as intertwined in the development of the Madras Art Movement. As noted by artist Bhaskaran: 'if not for the Art School in Madras, there would have been no productive art creativity, considering the conservative and unsupportive public as well as the media'. However, I will not dwell on Cholamandal because Chandru's legacy is linked to the Madras School of Art.
[309] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 206.
[310] Tartakov, 'Dalit Painting Seen from the Outside', 242.
[311] Tartakov, 'Dalit Painting Seen from the Outside', 242-247.

Chandru employs line to keep the figure intact in its form as a cow, recognisable to a viewer. In both *Matchbox Kamadhenu* and *Stitched-up Kamadhenu,* a dominance of line is immediately visible. The contours of the cow's body, as well as the decoration on the cow figure, are emphasised in his 'ceaselessly calligraphic' style. Even in *Triptych,* line is predominant in the first and second panels. The only abstraction we see is in the third panel of *Triptych* where the cow is abstracted in an expressionistic manner.

In Santhanaraj's canvases, single figure compositions were used to highlight the human, especially the female form. Chandru seems to have also incorporated this style of single figure compositions, especially in the three images discussed in this chapter. His images are simple with a focus on his central figure of the cow. The cow is not represented as among other figures, like in the calendar tradition where Kamadhenu is often represented accompanying Shiva and Parvathi as a faithful companion. Santhanaraj, and subsequently Chandru, were also influenced by the body as a mode of expression of the sense: in both artists' practices, they 'allow their bodies and senses to overtake and optically infuse their image-making process'.[312] But both artists pay attention to their roots, keeping to the theme of the 'regional modern' that dominated the Madras Art Movement.

Even though Santhanaraj had a direct influence on Chandru as his teacher, parallels can be seen in other artists of the Madras Group and Chandru's own work post-Madras Movement. The exploration of deities and religious forms, like in Chandru's work, is visible in works by other artists from the Madras School like Redappa Naidu, Anthony Doss, and Alphonso Doss. These artists explored iconic images of deities through line and colour and disengaged these deities from their religious undertones of Christianity and Hinduism with a level of abstraction.

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[312] Ebenezer Singh, curatorial statement for *Space, Body, Land & Senses- a Self-Conscious Wander between Thiruvannamalai and Thirunelveli,* displayed in Art World- Sarala's Art Centre, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0xsrY6uWw472j9EqnnfrK1s84cZ6pHS9DP5ddUMdPMxjYRHsae3F9jQamamEY3dG6l&id=1364220796&mibextid=Nif5oz.

Redappa Naidu's work removed the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana from their place in religion and ritual and placed them in a modernist sentiment: 'since the place of religion is problematic in the modern space, within which the sacred is generally evacuated, dissociation of these iconic forms from their religious auras enabled Redappa to manipulate the images to his advantage'.[313] This engagement with and dissociation from religion and ritual is visible in Chandru's canvases. He paints Kamadhenu, an iconic religious form, but removes from her the religious aura found in calendar prints and myths of Kamadhenu. In doing so, Chandru's paintings are placed in a modern space where the sacred is generally evacuated.

Chandru's parallels to artist K. Muralidharan, his contemporary, are directly visible in that both artists chose to represent Kamadhenu as a departure from traditional portrayals. Muralidharan's *Kamadhenu* (1984) (see Fig.2.6), while visibly different from Chandru's in style, shows an engagement by Madras Group artists with iconic forms like Kamadhenu. Muralidharan drew figures like Kamadhenu, 'stressing popular garish colours that are ubiquitous to Tamil visual culture'.[314] In his canvas, a green figure of Kamadhenu is complemented by a red and purple background. A Shiva *linga* is present under Kamadhenu's body with lotuses sprouting around it. Kamadhenu's wings also have flowers, showing an inclusion of natural form. Letters in Tamil are also seen on Kamadhenu's body, possibly drawing from Paniker's *Words and Symbols* series where he overlaid his canvases with Malayalam script. The inclusions of natural elements like flowers, as well as the depiction of the Kamadhenu hybrid as opposed to the Kamadhenu as mother is similar to Chandru's images in this chapter.

Tribal and folk culture influences are markedly visible in the canvases of J. Sultan Ali, who drew from Gujarati folk traditions. His bull forms are striking for even though they differ

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[313] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 208.
[314] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 210.

in style from Chandru's, the presence of the bull form as a bovine figure seems significant to Chandru's own depictions. Another influence from the Madras Group, quite far from tribal and folk culture, is the impact of abstract expressionism. This is visible in the work of L. Munuswamy, who drew from the movement with his gestural brushstrokes. Chandru's third panel in *Triptych* resembles Munuswamy's canvases, and has undertones particularly of Jackson Pollock's early work, even though the abstraction is only visible in one part of the tripartite panel division.

So far, the discussion has been focused on Chandru's legacy from the Madras Art Movement in terms of style. I would like to end this section with a small note on the legacy of the Madras Art Movement, and the Government College of Fine Arts, in relation to the freedom it allowed artists. To be enrolled in the College meant to be in a space where one was allowed to think 'freely' and question traditional social hierarchies. Over the course of my interview with Chandru, I noticed a certain preoccupation with the idea of 'artistic freedom' and 'freedom of creation', notions that possibly emerged as a result of his belonging to the Madras School. Chandru mentions that to produce 'free art', one must step away from social constructs like religion, caste, gender and politics. He contends that religion, caste, gender and politics, give rise to an anger that causes self-destruction, rather than a removal of the problems of these social constructs. In his WhatsApp message, and subsequent posting of the *Matchbox Kamadhenu* image to Facebook, the sketch was accompanied by a caption with a quote by Russian writer Maxim Gorky that spoke about how art and literature should be 'cautiously expressed as the soul of man'.[315] The quote seems to be from Gorky's *Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture, and the Bolsheviks, 1917-1918,* and reads: 'The good qualities

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[315] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.

in our soul are most successfully and forcefully awakened by the power of art. Just as science is the intellect of the world, art is its soul'. [316]

The importance of artistic freedom when depicting an animal like the cow is constantly debated today. Artists possibly feel afraid to portray such an animal so embedded in politics and religion. Chandru's preoccupation with freedom of expression as removed from these social constructs of politics and religion presents as a paradox: how to be free from *yet* engaged with social hierarchies? Though Chandru states that stepping away from social constructs would lead to a 'free art', his own images are definitely embedded within the social constructs of religion and caste. The need for Chandru to show that the cow is an animal over its constructed or imagined divinity indicates that he considers art an essential tool to show people the realities of their surroundings, or in other words, the social constructs that they live in. This is also seen in Chandru's role as a teacher. For instance, Chandru took three of his students to Ramanathapuram following the atrocity of 1998, so that a response in the form of visual art by his students could perform as a record of the atrocity.[317] The paintings made were displayed at the Dalit Resource Centre in Madurai. Similarly, Chandru was pleased that his art had been used to highlight the links between caste and the cow in *The Caravan* article from November 2019. Therefore, though Chandru claims to step away from social hierarchies to achieve a 'free art', the true freedom in his art lies in his visual expressions of these social hierarchies from a place of objectivity where he brings together strands like religion, caste and the animal.

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[316] Chandru probably quoted from a Tamil translation of Gorky's book. The closest quote I could find in English was the above.

[317] See Tartakov, 'Dalit Painting Seen from the Outside', 240-248. This was an event where violence against Dalits was recorded in the form of visual art by Chandru and four of his Dalit students. Their art was in response to this event and supported by the Tamil Theological Seminary, Madurai.

The Cow as Commodity

One of the main reasons for the viewership of a cow as divine image rather than animal is the visual commodification of the cow through the circulation of calendar prints. Kajri Jain's suggests that 'images, particularly mass-produced images, are bodies that move; they move from sites of production to those of circulation and use; they move across the states of commodity, gift, icon, ornament, waste; they move in and out of people's everyday lives and frames of value'.[318] As I argued in Chapter One, the cow, in its movement as part of visual media, is always an 'image' rather than an 'animal'. This image was created largely through a popularisation of calendar prints that showed the cow as Kamadhenu and entered the spaces of people's daily lives as a religious commodity. The term commodity in association with the cow underlines a link to the commodification of the Hindu pantheon. A discussion on this commodification is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to note that this commodification of religion was linked to the printing presses that were established under colonial rule.[319] In this section, I will explore three forms of movement of the cow as commodity as it appears in Chandru's work. These three forms of commodification can be broadly categorised into the circulation of the cow image as a religious commodity, the export of slaughtered cows as beef, and the cow's skin as part of a leather tradition that makes objects.

In *Stitched-up Kamadhenu*, a link to calendar prints that highlight Kamadhenu and circulate the image of the cow is clear. This link stems from the style in which Chandru has rendered the iconography of Kamadhenu. One can discern a lineage of this style from Chandru's initial training as an artist under his uncle, a well-established calendar print maker

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[318] Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar,* 218-219.

[319] The idea of calendar prints and commodification is discussed extensively in scholarship by authors like Kajri Jain (2007), Christopher Pinney (2004), Patricia Uberoi (2003), and Erwin Neumeyer and Christine Schelberger (2008).

at Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu. [320] In *Stitched-up Kamadhenu,* one can see Chandru's preoccupation with line, bursting in places with its calligraphic form. Unlike the calendar prints where Kamadhenu is seen accompanying Shiva or Parvathi, or as a lone cow that enshrines gods within her body, the Kamadhenu in this image stands alone on a pedestal. The watercolour rendition of Kamadhenu here also reflects Chandru's training as a sculptor—despite this being a two-dimensional painting, an element of the sculptural form is visible in the way that Chandru has rendered the bovine figure on a pedestal, as well as in the way he has constructed the image of Kamadhenu. It appears as though the image might even be a preparatory sketch for a sculpture in the making.

As I discussed in Chapter One, calendar art imagery that represents the cow is most often linked to the myth of Kamadhenu. Other representations of the cow in calendar art imagery follow the Nathdwara tradition and represent the cow with Krishna. For Chandru's image, the image of Kamadhenu is important, especially Kamadhenu's representation as linked to Goddess Lakshmi. The 'regime of the Hindu goddess' is illustrated by the representation of Mother India as a mix of goddesses Lakshmi and Durga; [321] the cow as divine falls under the same regime in terms of her protecting nature and nurturing of India as a country.[322] Patricia Uberoi emphasises Kajri Jain's argument of being able to highlight a 'demonstrable "historicity" of calendar imagery while yet avoiding "teleology"'.[323] Drawing from this, in paying attention to the way in which the development of the cow image took place over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I think of the image of the cow as not only serving a general Hindu ideology, but also aspects of the cow when represented as Kamadhenu as serving a specifically Shaivite Hindu tradition. Of course, the story of Kamadhenu is linked to

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[320] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author. Also, see Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar,* 162-165, for a discussion on calendar prints from Virudhunagar and its link to the Sivakasi printing presses.
[321] Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 195.
[322] See Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India', 4295-4297 for a discussion on the idea of cow protectionism in terms of the nation.
[323] Uberoi, '"Unity in Diversity?"', 197.

Shiva and Parvati, but to explicitly portray this in calendar imagery illustrates that these images of Kamadhenu were meant for audiences that engaged in Shiva worship.

Here, my discussion on the image of Kamadhenu as linked to Shiva and Parvathi, and Goddess Durga, is to show that Chandru's version of Kamadhenu seems to emerge from this tradition rather than the tradition of cow representations as Gaumata. The Kamadhenu image as *Gaumata,* where gods are encompassed within her body, speaks to a more multiple yet fragmented Hindu identity. There, the cow stood for a 'proto-nation', a space that literally embodied the Hindu ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[324] These Kamadhenu images, even in their fragmented identity of Hinduism, seem to mirror a more general idea of Hinduism and a Hindu nation state, rather than linked to one god such as Shiva. As seen in Chandru's image, a link to the tradition where Kamadhenu is in the presence of Shiva and Parvati is clear. Chandru depicts Kamadhenu with a cow's body, woman's face, and birds' feathers, mirroring the way Kamadhenu is usually printed in calendars (though without the peacock wings). In *Matchbox Kamadhenu,* a similar portrayal of Kamadhenu is visible. The Kamadhenu figure in *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* also resembles the second panel in *Triptych*. In both images, the bovine figure stands on a pedestal. However, the figure in *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* is clearly representative of Kamadhenu because of the characteristic features like the woman's face on the cow's body, and the wings. In *Triptych,* the second panel links more to Nandi the bull, who is Shiva's *vahana*. It is curious that Chandru's bovine figures are associated with Shiva; this possibly reflects that one of the most recognisable forms of the cow as divine image in Tamil Nadu is linked to the Shaivite pantheon because of the worship of Kamadhenu in temples like Marundeeswarar Kovil mentioned in Chapter One.

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[324] See Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 106-112, for a detailed discussion on chromolithographs and the cow.

Either way, the commodification of the bovine is a recurring theme that links the images. The Kamadhenu in the first image is directly linked to the calendar print tradition and the circulation of such images as an economy of religion. This economy of religion is also underlined in *Matchbox Kamadhenu,* where matchboxes commemorated and circulated historic events and icons. While the Nandi bovine is used in temple processions as a sculpture, the commodification here is seen in the act of worship and the display of religion as a moving object. The commodification of the cow as a religious embodiment of a Hindu upper caste ideology, understood through protected ignorance is highlighted in these images by Chandru.[325]

In *Glassbox Kamadhenu*, since Chandru renders Kamadhenu inside a glass box, a certain commodification becomes attached to the cow-as-image, especially in that it is 'for export only'. It is significant that the export of the cow in the glass box is directly linked to the representation of Kamadhenu, because Kamadhenu represents the cow-as-image being exported as the idea of Hindu India. Two forms of export seem to emerge when reading Chandru's image. The first is linked to the commodification of religion, where the cow-as-image (or idea) of India as a nation is exported. The second form of export is connected with the sale of beef from India.

The commodification of religion and the export of cow-as-image is linked to Kamadhenu standing inside a glass box, almost as though Kamadhenu is an object or icon that is part of a museum display, ready to be shipped. The Kamadhenu idea (which is the cow-as-image) then is exported as an idea of India. This commodification of India as a country of Hindu religiosity and divinity, and a country where people pray to the cow, is a popular idea that has migrated to the West. It is also similar to the commodification of religion, presented

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[325] See Alone, 'Caste Life Narratives, Visual Representation, and Protected Ignorance'. As discussed in the Introduction, the idea of 'protected ignorance' stems from the ignorance with which ideas on art are approached.

as the cow through calendar prints. This idea reflects a caste bias, for India is made out to be a uniform, singular nation that subscribes to the upper caste Hindu ideology of cow worship. The view of India in the West is often associated with cows and religion. The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) in fact argues that India is not just a land of curry and cows, claiming that this is a reductive view of India. While their argument sounds 'progressive', it must be placed within the larger framework of the HAF's ideologies, which include suggestions that caste practices no longer exist in India or among Indians in the diaspora.[326] The way India is perceived and embodied as the cow is significant to the cow-as-image, interpreted only as connected with Hindu religiosity and divinity. Chandru's image suggests that the cow-as-image is the pervading idea, synonymising the cow and the Indian nation. Parallels can be drawn in the way that the symbol of the cow was used during a Hindu renaissance in the nineteenth century to propagate revulsion at those who did not worship the cow, and the way the current image of the cow is used. In the nineteenth century, the symbol of the cow came to represent a nation (India) against the colonisers, but this nation was in reference to the times before Islamic rule in India, where India was purportedly a Hindu state. Even though the cow was important in history, it was not revered or protected the way it is today. D. N. Jha notes that the 'holiness of the cow is elusive',[327] and like Wendy Doniger, states that a temple in the cow's honour, as well as cow goddess,[328] did not exist. Chandru's Kamadhenu, read in light of this, notes that the image of India as embodied in Kamadhenu is being exported to the West, despite different truths that exist within the country.

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[326] See *'No - India Is Not a Land of Caste, Cow, Curry & Karma.' Suhag Shukla*, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSFRsRxIWqQ and Udit Raj, 'CISCO Is Just the Start; Caste System Is Finally Getting Global Recognition', TheQuint, 14 April 2023, https://www.thequint.com/opinion/udit-raj-cisco-just-the-start-caste-system-finally-getting-global-recognition.
Caste biases are increasingly becoming apparent in the news, especially among corporations in the United States of America. It is now clear that caste hierarchies have permeated other countries.
Also see Udit Raj, 'CISCO Is Just the Start; Caste System Is Finally Getting Global Recognition', *TheQuint*, 14 April 2023, https://www.thequint.com/opinion/udit-raj-cisco-just-the-start-caste-system-finally-getting-global-recognition.
[327] Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 146.
[328] Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, 658.

The second commodification of the cow is linked to India as a large exporter of the cow as beef. Though Kamadhenu is in a glass box, which is unlikely to be used in the transportation of beef, it is the box rather than the material that suggests a commodification. Additionally, the box is marked with the phrase 'for export only' which directly links to the idea of international trade. Commodification is further enhanced by accompanying phrases like 'cultivation in India' and 'MRP 100'. MRP stands for Maximum Retail Price and is the highest price a product can be sold at by manufacturers in India. The phrase 'cultivation in India' is an interesting choice of words for two reasons. First, it suggests that Kamadhenu is an idea that has taken root in Indian soil. Second, the very idea of cultivation is linked to agriculture which in turn is related to the cow, therefore foreclosing the idea of Kamadhenu the divine in relation to Kamadhenu the cow. Interestingly, the phrase 'cultivation in India' seems aligned with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' campaign, an initiative by the Government of India to encourage corporations to develop and manufacture products made in India, and in turn, create incentives for inward investments.

The placement of Kamadhenu in a glass box with a price tag attached, as well as a tagline about export, indicates commodification, and commodification in terms of the death of the cow. The mass slaughter of bovines in India is linked to the country's place as one of the world's largest beef exporters, leather producers, and milk producers. It is an astounding paradox that on the one hand, India condemns the killing of the cow, but on the other, it was also the world's largest beef exporter, based on figures from 2014.[329] Even though a large part of India's beef comes from water buffaloes, cows also constitute a significant export number. Yamini Narayanan shows how a thriving dairy industry such as India cannot sustain itself without the slaughter of bovines.[330] Since India is reliant on its large dairy industry, beef export due to the slaughter of cows remains high. As an industry, dairying requires breeding large

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[329] Narayanan, 'Mother Cow, Mother India', 30.
[330] Narayanan, 'Mother Cow, Mother India', 41-46.

numbers of bovines, and slaughtering those that are not useful anymore. As these cows and buffaloes are no longer useful, they are often sold to have enough monetary support to buy new cows to sustain the dairy industry. Interestingly, India does not rear cows for beef consumption, even though it is among the largest exporters of beef. Usually it is the 'useless' bovines who are not producing milk for the dairy industry that are slaughtered for meat. A distinction here is made between the Jersey and native cow, for the killing of a Jersey cow is not considered a breach of a religious code.[331]

We might also use the encasement of the cow in a glass box as a prompt to discuss the death of the animal in relation to global contemporary art. The animal inside a glass box immediately recalls the work of Damien Hirst who has achieved a high level of notoriety and fame, particularly in his early years, in making works with preserved dead animals in formaldehyde, ostensibly to question the fragility of human existence in a physiological sense. Though, if viewed sympathetically, Hirst intended a deep enquiry into human existence, his work became 'commodified' due to links with collectors and gallerists like Charles Saatchi, thereby standing in as a symbol of circulation in the art market. Hirst's use of an actual animal in a physical space is dissimilar from Chandru's version of Kamadhenu in a glass box, in that Kamadhenu is only a pencil sketch on paper. However, the underlying commodification is the same. Hirst suspends a dead animal in a glass box, while Chandru presents a rendering of a mythical creature in a similar enclosure. Hirst's animal is physically dead yet materially real. Chandru's animal is not only imagined as a creature of myth (since Kamadhenu is mythical) but also a real animal does not exist here in a physical space. Instead, it is only a pencil sketch that the viewer engages with. Giovanni Aloi has argued that there are two categories of physical animal killings in contemporary art practice. The first is along the lines of the already dead animal being presented as an art object, like in formaldehyde (Hirst) or taxidermy. The second

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[331] This was discussed in Chapter One.

is where the actual animal is in the space of the artwork; here, the viewer is aware of the 'imminent possibility or unavoidable contingency of death'.[332] In that case, Steve Baker's question becomes important: 'can contemporary art productively address the killing of animals?'.[333] The question of Chandru's mythical creature in a box becomes significant in light of this approach: is this creature already dead? Is it preserved, ready to be exported? In Chandru's work, no physical animal is killed, let alone harmed. Yet Chandru's figure seems ready for export, as beef, and thus as a dead animal. A third category of an animal killing in contemporary art practice then emerges. While this is not a physical harming of the animal which is presented as a dead object to the viewer, the implicit suggestion and the imminent threat of the meaning of export in the case of the cow is clearly sinister.

The last commodification I would like to comment on is in reference to the stitched-up nature of Kamadhenu in *Stitched-up Kamadhenu*. Chandru hinted that the stitching up was in reference to a toy—like a stuffed-animal for children, Kamadhenu is stitched up.[334] This recalls sentiments of the Madras Art Movement where artist K. Sreenivasulu adapted Thirupathi toys and puppets in his artwork, and artist Alphonso Doss drew from the Kumbakonam wooden toy craft.[335] We might then ask why Kamadhenu was stitched up in this way. Was she torn apart for any reason? Three links then become apparent here: first, that the stitching up implies that something was made whole again after damage, second, that the stitching resembles a stuffing that takes place in taxidermy, and third, that the stitching in fact recalls the leather tradition largely associated with Dalits.

[332] Giovanni Aloi, 'The Death of the Animal', *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 9, no. 1 (1 January 2010): 62, https://doi.org/10.1386/jvap.9.1.59_1.

[333] Steve Baker, '"You Kill Things to Look at Them": Animal Death in Contemporary Art', in ASG (The Animal Studies Group), Killing Animals, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 79 in Aloi, 'The Death of the Animal', 62.

[334] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.

[335] Bhagat, 'Crafting Modernity through Regional Traditions: The Madras Art Movement', 206.

The leather tradition that I mentioned is particularly noteworthy in relation to the cow and caste. Historically, upper castes do not associate with dead cows—as I mentioned in the Introduction and Chapter One, the collection of cow carcasses was left to Dalits, both for food as carrion and for the skinning of the dead cow for leather. This degraded occupation and association with the cow in its death was one of the root causes for caste and untouchability. Savi Sawarkar's *Untouchable with Dead Cow I* and *Untouchable with Dead Cow II* (see Figs. 1.21 and 1.22) highlights the relationship of dead cow and Dalit. Many instances of violence surrounding the skinning of the dead cow have taken place, like the incident at Una I mentioned in Chapter One. Studies have however highlighted that though the menial labour has been performed by Dalits, colonial rule, which commodified the leather trade, trained upper castes in the chemical processes of leather in institutions like Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI), Chennai. This distinguished upper castes as having the knowledge behind leather but not having to engage with a stigmatised object like skin from a dead cow, while Dalits were both required for the manual work in this regard yet simultaneously discriminated against for their engagement with the skin, and kept away from being allowed to engage with the intellectual labour.[336] A recent exploration of the *mridangam* maker's use of leather by singer T. M. Krishna shows a protected ignorance of the leather industry. In his journey to North Chennai, Krishna engages with the makers of the *mridangams*, a specific drum used in Carnatic music, and realises the way in which they treat the skin of cows and use it to make different leathers that are subsequently used to produce different drum beat sounds. Once again, the *mridangam* player engages in an intellectual labour of music in the *sabha* or *auditorium*. The

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[336] See Shahana Bhattacharya, 'Transforming Skin, Changing Caste: Technical Education in Leather Production in India, 1900–1950', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 55, no. 3 (1 July 2018): 307–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464618778411 and Shivani Kapoor, 'The Smell of Caste: Leatherwork and Scientific Knowledge in Colonial India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (3 September 2021): 983–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2021.1969728.

player is usually upper caste and the *sabha* culture is usually meant for an upper caste audience.[337]

Chandru's stitching up/repairing of Kamadhenu, thereby stitching up cow skin, is a direct link to the leather trade. In stitching up Kamadhenu, does he render her a dead animal in that skin from the dead animal is usually used for stitching? But Kamadhenu seems to stand tall on the pedestal, gazing outwards and even defecating. The stitching appears as a metaphor that links the leather trade to caste, if the history of these industries is contextualised. Most often, upper castes wear leather in the form of slippers, or they carry bags, without much regard for the source. The leather, once treated, becomes a luxury good (though now the use of leather increasingly carries negative connotations through the rise of animal rights awareness). However, the livelihoods of several people like the *mridangam* makers rely on leather production.

The usage of leather by upper castes once again signals a protected ignorance wherein there is happiness and wealth associated with the finished visible product, but the invisible caste labour that goes into the leather is still unseen. Chandru's portrayal of a *stitched-up* cow then highlights the invisible trade and places the leather trade in direct conversation with the divine form of the cow as Kamadhenu. This portrayal shows that on the one hand, the cow is worshipped, but on the other, the same people who worship it, use it as a constituent part of everyday goods they purchase, or even consume it as beef (as mentioned earlier).

Although the leather trade is directly related to the idea of stitching-up, as well as caste, a tangential yet relevant discussion of taxidermy is necessary. While taxidermy is a physical process and involves 'real' animals that are killed and subsequently stuffed, the Kamadhenu in Chandru's work reveals a sinister stitching up that somewhat reflects the technical process of

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[337] T. M. Krishna, *Sebastian & Sons: A Brief History of Mrdangam Makers* (Chennai: Context, an imprint of Westland Publications Private Limited, 2020).

taxidermy. Though Chandru suggested that his Kamadhenu figure could be a child's toy, the oozing of green substance like glue seems to indicate a deeper layer of meaning, one quite far from a child's plaything.

Donna Haraway notes that 'taxidermy fulfils the fatal desire to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction'.[338] She further expands her analysis to highlight that the making of something whole in taxidermy is usually true to nature, in the sense that it represents an 'epistemological and aesthetic stance of realism'.[339] This suggests that taxidermy is a form of perfection, 'an unblemished type specimen' that is true to the natural form.[340] We might then ask how Chandru's *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* can be read within this framework of taxidermy? To answer this, let us turn to Steve Baker who extensively discusses the idea of 'botching' or sticking something together in an imperfect way, 'with no attempt at perfection but equally with no implication of the thing falling apart'.[341] Chandru's Kamadhenu is clearly stitched or 'botched' together, with the stitches and seams visible 'with no attempt at perfection' in his watercolour rendition. It is neither unblemished nor real, and Chandru does not attempt to show the cow as true to 'nature', but it is indeed true to its natural form as a deity. The cow, in India, must never be marred or slashed or harmed. Stitching the cow up implies that something went wrong in the first place, that the cow was not whole to begin with. Considering taxidermy, Chandru's decision to stitch Kamadhenu up relates to making whole the harmed cow as a *perfect* divine cow from India. The 'botched taxidermy' Kamadhenu in Chandru's work, with its visible stitches,[342] then shows a disruption of the perfect divine cow, and in turn, a disruption of the immortalisation of an upper caste Hindu ideology.

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[338] Donna Haraway, 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936', *Social Text*, no. 11 (1984): 25, https://doi.org/10.2307/466593.

[339] Haraway, 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy', 34.

[340] Haraway, 'Teddy Bear Patriarchy', 34.

[341] Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 64.

[342] Baker, *The Postmodern Animal*, 75. It is interesting that Baker defines a 'botched taxidermy' animal as referring to the human and animal, similar to Kamadhenu's representation as a hybrid figure.

One might wonder why I am placing a watercolour in the same paradigmatic set of analysis as one might use for an actual taxidermy or preservation. By placing Chandru's image within these categories, it is my intention to show that cow viewership and interpretation is complex. Even though the physical cow is killed in India, the actual physical harming of the cow for art would incite large-scale protest and violence. Through the painted medium, Chandru shows that one can read images of the animal, and specifically the cow, through a lens that combines various facets. In a way, Chandru presents one answer to Steve Baker's question: can contemporary art productively address the killing of animals? Here, the killing of an animal, and the killing of a human in relation to the ideology that the animal represents (for instance, the flogging at Una mentioned in Chapter One), can be analysed through a watercolour painting that focuses subtly on the ideologies of caste and religion in India.

The Animality of the Cow

As the discussion above has shown, Chandru's works on Kamadhenu highlight the myriad ways to approach reading the Kamadhenu image. The commodification of the cow as beef and as an ideology were emphasised in Chandru's work. Similarly, through stitching Kamadhenu up, the implications of the leather trade as well as processes like taxidermy and botching become relevant to the commodification of the cow-as-image. In this section, the animality or animal nature of the cow as depicted by Chandru in his artworks is examined. Using a combination of the techniques he employs, his statements in his interview, *The Caravan* article captions, and visual analysis, the section reads Chandru's images with the intention of understanding the cow-as-animal.

When *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* first appeared in *The Caravan*, the caption that accompanied it read 'the artist Chandru's stitched-up Kamadhenu (2003) points to how the cow, even if deified and exalted in present-day Hindu belief, remains an animal that eats, shits

and dies like any other. When the cow dies, the disposal of its carcass is left to those whom Hindu dogma most denigrates—the Dalits.'[343] The phrase '*remains* an animal that eats, shits and dies like any other' (emphasis added) seems a good starting point to the following discussion. The word *remains* also suggests that the cow was first an animal and remains as one, and the divinity with which the cow is depicted in the image comes second. In my interview with Chandru, he echoed this sentiment—he suggested that the divine cow was an 'imagined' cow of human fiction, but the real cow was one that 'eats, shits and dies like any other'. Chandru implied that before the cow could become divine, one first required to acknowledge her animality, and then have her *remain* as an animal by understanding that the divinity was wholly 'imagined' in the first place; his 'free art' and moving away from social constructs like religion has helped him realise this notion and portray it in his art. [344]

Even though the presence of cow dung in the *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* is supposed to indicate that the cow, like other animals, engages in the removal of bodily waste, cow dung in India has several connotations. Typically, cow dung is used for rituals that are linked to purification. Cow dung is also one of five elements of *Panchagavya,* a substance used in rituals. I mentioned *Panchagavya* in the Introduction as being used by upper castes to purify a tank of water that Ambedkar led Dalits to drink from (also known as the Mahar Satyagraha). Therefore, *Panchagavya* as a purifier is directly linked to caste. Chandru's insertion of cow dung is particularly interesting in the context of cow dung as a purifying and religious material. While his claim is that the cow dung indicates the cow is an animal because it 'shits like any other',[345] the immediate association of cow dung with religion and purification shows that the cow is viewed as a divine being first in India. Additionally, linking to the calendar tradition of Kamadhenu, cow dung replaces the milk that usually gushes onto the Shiva *linga* in calendar

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[343] Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.
[344] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.
[345] Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.

prints. Milk is also one of the elements of the *Panchagavya*. Overall, due to the cow's indelible links with religion, even the presence of materials from the cow like cow dung point to the divine nature of the cow, rather than its animality. The religious nature of cow dung, while briefly touched upon here, will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five when exploring the work of artist Kirtika Kain.

In the way that *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* uses cow dung to highlight the animality of the cow, Chandru's *Triptych* also suggests the cow's animal nature and evolution. In the first panel of *Triptych*, the curved line inside the cow's body suggests an intestine. The curvature is indicative that this intestinal line is longer than the body of the cow. This depicts a process and duration for the digestion of food; the length of the intestine is extended when compared to the body of the cow so as to allow for digestion. Chandru intends to show that there is logic to natural processes.[346] This curved line drawing of the intestines is supposed to suggest that this cow is real, very much derived from the interaction between humans and animals. The cow in this panel also resembles bovine figures seen in cave paintings. The drawings of the insides of animals reflects Chandru's interest in showing the insides of bodies. In his piece titled *X-ray* (1998), one sees the presence of weapons among bones of human bodies to show the 'persecution of Dalits which must have been true, emotionally if not literally'.[347] This work was to highlight the violence of the Ramanathapuram (Tamil Nadu) riots of 1998. The intestines in *Triptych* are serene in comparison to *X-ray*, which highlights violence against Dalits. The interest in the insides of the body is also reflective of a longer history, where artists like Leonardo da Vinci rendered detailed sketches of human and animal bodies in his sketchbooks to study anatomy. Chandru's intestinal drawing is not a real depiction of cow

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[346] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.
[347] Gary Michael Tartakov, 'Dalit Art and Imagery: Expanding the Indian Contemporary', in *20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary*, ed. Parul Dave Mukherji, Rakhee Balaram, and Partha Mitter (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022), 546.

intestines in scientific terms but reflects an affinity for the animal itself as having a body, rather than just being a divine fictionalised form. This interest in the anatomy of a cow's body is visible in some preparatory drawings by Chandru, in which parts of the cow are labelled in Tamil (see Fig.2.7).

The second panel of *Triptych* is similar to *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* in that a bovine stands alone on a pedestal. This panel links directly to religion, and devotion, as the representation of the bovine resembles Nandi the bull. Here, Chandru's intention seems to contrast with the first panel. While the first panel highlights animality, this panel implies that the divinity of the bovine is part of the way humans view the cow.

The third panel of the cow in *Triptych* is expressionist in style and reveals Chandru's lineage from the Madras Art Movement. The artists in this movement, like Santhanaraj and L. Munuswamy, were particularly interested in an abstraction of form. Unlike other movements and schools in India, they looked to European masters to study abstraction and thereby express this abstraction similarly to the way Chandru has in this panel. The third panel with the abstract cow shows 'not a normal cow or a ritual cow'.[348] This panel is Chandru's attempt at rendering a cow that has the potential to scare a human being. For instance, the torn skin and cuts seen on its body alongside colours of red, yellow and black are placed as elements to draw the viewer into the cow's mangled form. As mentioned earlier, this violence and dark nature of the panel is strikingly different from the other two panels which are softer and more muted. Essentially, in this panel, Chandru intends to give visual form to the idea that the cow should not be harmed or subjected to violence, the way it has been subjected to violence in his rendition.[349] This panel, in its abstraction, is possibly the most successful in dissociating the cow from religion. The slightly distorted form, though still distinguishable as a cow, is seen more as a cow than a

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[348] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.
[349] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.

divine creature. In constructing the figure of the cow through distortion, even though the intended message was about violence, the cow-as-animal appears most distinct and removed from its association with Kamadhenu. Chandru mentioned here that his intention was to show that the cow should not be harmed the way it has been on his canvas. This reflects a larger social picture of violence against the cow and violence in the name of the cow, where lynching and flogging are a result of cow slaughter. As mentioned in the Introduction, the violence against humans because of a violence against the cow is unique to cow politics in relation to caste. It does not seem likely that Chandru's depiction of violence against the cow aligns with the politics of *gau rakshaks;* instead, it appears as though he references his relatedness to the cow.[350]

The main purpose of *Triptych* seems to be to showcase the cow *as animal* in varying environments conceptualised by the *human.* In other words, Chandru's three panels highlight three styles of imagining the cow in 'human' terms: in cave paintings as an interaction between humans and animals, as an 'imagined' divinity through the depiction of a bovine creature resembling a temple sculpture, and finally in an expressionist landscape. According to *The Caravan* article, the purpose of *Triptych* was to represent an 'evolution in human views of the cow'.[351] The article additionally captions the image to say that 'perceptions of the same animal keep changing, and the cow remains an indifferent subject for humans to spin images of'.[352] In terms of an 'evolution', the *Triptych* seems to show a chronological advancement from cave painting to what one could term 'modern' art. But for the magazine to specify that the cow is a subject for 'humans to spin images of' alludes to Chandru's suggestion that the cow is fictionalised and imagined as Kamadhenu, as well as that the cow is always a subject for the human.

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[350] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.
[351] Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.
[352] Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.

Chandru employs certain techniques in his images to distinguish the animal from the 'imagined' nature of the cow. The cow figure in both *Stitched-up Kamadhenu* and *Kamadhenu in a Box* is placed as a lone figure on a pedestal (similar to a temple sculpture), and as a lone figure in a box. This depiction of the lone bovine is also seen in the second panel of *Triptych*. The placement of the cow alone in a space with no 'real' landscape contrasts with other depictions of Kamadhenu. The solitary figure with barely any background elements is suggestive of an 'imagined' landscape according to Chandru. By erasing any elements of a 'real' landscape, the cow's identity becomes 'imagined' for it is not in the 'real' world. He specifies that if the cow was real, it would be in a natural landscape with trees, flowers and birds.[353] Placing an animal against a background devoid of natural elements shows a logic where the animal removed from nature helps decontextualise its animality. That is, by eliminating the natural habitat, environment and setting of the cow, and placing it in an empty space on a pedestal, Chandru shows that his cow is 'imagined' and thus divine.

The lone figure of the cow is also suggestive of a style used by the Madras Art Movement, especially Chandru's teacher Santhanaraj, who emphasised the female form by isolating it. The cow is also a female form, and in this particular depiction of Kamadhenu, Chandru has rendered the cow with the face of a woman, similar to the calendar prints which equate Kamadhenu to Goddess Lakshmi rather than to Mother Cow who embodies gods within her body. Therefore, it appears that in its isolation, Chandru emphasises the divine form of the cow, though the underlying message of the artwork is to highlight its animality.

The distinctions between the 'imagined' cow and the 'real' cow relate to its divinity as 'imagined' and its animal nature as 'real'. In *Glassbox Kamadhenu*, the figure of the cow is sketched alone in a box. Here, the landscape is the glass box, which as analysed above, implies

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[353] G Chandru, interview by author, August 18, 2022, transcript with author.

the export of the cow as beef, or the export of the 'image' of the cow to the West. As beef, the cow's animality is at the forefront, for it is the real animal that is killed for export. But if it is the ideology of Kamadhenu that is being exported in the form of cow-as-image, the cow remains 'imagined' and a piece of fiction, exported as a suggestion of the Indian country. The reciprocal relationship of human-animal drives Chandru's intention to show the cow-as-animal in his work. Kamadhenu as divine is also exotic, so Chandru places her on a pedestal, and in a glass box, isolated from nature and fictionalised by protected ignorance of upper caste Hindu ideology. Ultimately, Chandru seems to point toward the fallacy of human nature's fictionalised cows.

Conclusion

Through a close reading of Chandru's works, I have explored the ways in which the artist has attempted to portray images of the cow. In *Stitched-up Kamadhenu,* I have highlighted that the figure of the cow as Kamadhenu is derived from calendar prints. This derivation directly commodifies Kamadhenu in the way that calendar prints form an economy of religion. Furthermore, the commodification of the cow in this image as a leather object has also been highlighted. This commodification is also seen in the idea of export in *Glassbox Kamadhenu.* Here, ideas relating to the export of beef from India as well as the export of the cow-as-image have been delineated.

Through *Triptych,* Chandru's attempts at emphasising human images and depictions of the cow in varying environments have been examined. The different panels and their implications have been looked at closely, especially in relation to the 'imagined' cow and the 'real' cow. These binaries have also been viewed in Chandru's depiction of the cow as a lone figure as opposed to in its natural environment.

As seen in Chapter One, the cow has most always stood for nationalistic pride, politics and religion, similar to views today, laying bare the impression that the cow has always been embedded in religious and political tropes, no matter the politics of the time. This ties in well with the idea of protected ignorance as the lens through which the cow's meaning is assumed in India, wherein it is understood through tropes of upper caste Hinduism. As Y. S .Alone makes clear in his work, these tropes are always disseminated in the way in which upper caste scholars understand them. This dissemination often ignores the experiences of Dalits and therefore gives rise to what Y. S. Alone terms protected ignorance. Chandru's work demonstrates that protected ignorance has always been widespread in the perception of the cow, whether in earlier or contemporary times. Therefore, the cow-as-image has often superseded the physical animality of the cow in Indian public debate.

Without doubt, Chandru's painted cows have disrupted Hindu upper caste religious tropes of the cow. However, the animality of the cow is often not considered when reading Chandru's work. In reading Chandru's images using the contexts of Hinduism, caste, and the cow, I have shown that it is possible to extend images that depict the cow over spaces that embody wide-ranging ideas. Chandru's work thus presents a new conjuncture within which the social hierarchies of caste can be challenged by bringing together the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal.

Additionally, Chandru's work also brings out methodological issues in terms of human and animal relations in India. His representations of the cow are largely human centric in that they show human perspectives of either the evolutionary aspects of the cow or the divine status of cows. His work also highlights that as a society our understanding of the cow is only through a human and Hindu oriented lens. The same issues that embed Hindu oriented frameworks are parallel to the anthropomorphism with which the cow (and other animals) is understood. Drawing from this parallelism, we can begin to consider methodological ideas of the human

and animal in India by understanding that Hinduism is a driving force of the anthropomorphic bearings of the cow in India, and only by starting to untangle these complications will we be able to scratch the topmost layer of the surface and emphasise that the cow is an animal. In an article focused on beef eating and the issues surrounding food and caste, the inclusion of artworks that are supposed to highlight the animality of the cow possibly shows a turn to ecology wherein the animal nature of the cow can begin to supplant its religious and political counterparts. Chandru shows that the cow is a representational visual register with which to study the larger anthropomorphic divinity that cows in India encompass. The paradox in analysing Chandru's work then remains: how to be free from *yet* engaged with social hierarchies? To disrupt this divinity and suggest an animal turn is difficult but not impossible. A push towards understanding Chandru's relatedness to the cow enables an exploration of social hierarchies like caste and aesthetic ecologies like the status of the animal.

CHAPTER THREE
THE PERFORMATIVE COW: SAJAN MANI

> No, not a single letter is seen
> On my race
> So many histories are seen
> On so many races
> Scrutinize each one of them
> The whole histories of the world
> Not a single letter is seen
> On my race.
> ('Song' by Poykayil Appachan) [354]

These words of Poykayil Appachan (1879-1939), a revolutionary social reformer and Dalit leader from Kerala, highlight an erasure of the written histories of caste in Kerala ('not a single letter is seen/ on my race'). An informed and popular orator and poet, Appachan often wrote songs and poems to underline the practice of caste across religions. His written word was oriented toward 'the memory of slavery and rootedness in the soil from ancient times' so as to point in the direction of a present that could come out of this 'slavery'.[355] The artist Sajan Mani (b.1981) takes inspiration from Appachan's work both implicitly and explicitly. For instance, in *Alphabet of Touch><Overstretched Bodies and Muted Howls for Songs* (2020) (see Fig.3.1)*,* Mani draws Malayalam letters across the surfaces of the gallery wall in Nome Gallery, Berlin, directly responding to Appachan's call that 'there was none on the earth to write the story of my race'. Though *Alphabet of Touch* presents a direct link between Appachan and Mani, other performances by Mani also echo Appachan's laments. This chapter analyses three of these other performances by Mani, keeping Appachan's words in mind, as well as the idea of protected ignorance that is instrumental in ensuring the invisibility and erasure of caste in India today. Mani records the memories of his ancestors and questions the social hierarchies of caste

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[354] V V Swamy and E V Anil, eds., *Unknown Subjects: Songs of Poykayil Appachan 1905-1939*, trans. Ajay S Sekher (Kottayam: Institute of PRDS Studies, 2008).

[355] Ajay S. Sekher, 'Poykayil Appachan, Practitioner of Critique and Co-Option', *The Asian Age*, 23 February 2018, sec. All India, https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/230218/poykayil-appachan-practitioner-of-critique-and-co-option.html.

in his performances. As I will show in this chapter, the invocation of the cow in Mani's work provides a space to consider questions of caste labour, caste erasure and food practices.

Sajan Mani's *Beef Project* (see Figs.3.2 and 3.3), a six-hour performance at the Mumbai Gallery Weekend (part of Chatterjee & Lal) in 2015, was the artist's initial foray into the commercial art world. This performative artwork explored themes of food and caste, and the general ideas surrounding the consumption of beef in India, especially in Maharashtra (the state in which Mumbai is the capital city), which is known for having been one of the earliest states to ban the consumption of beef due to the religious nature of the cow.[356] For the performance itself, Mani curled up inside a biryani pot, sourced directly from biryani makers who regularly utilised the pot to cook for weddings. The pot was just large enough to fit Mani's curled up body. It was placed in an inconspicuous corner of the gallery with a spotlight over it. At first glance, it was not apparent that a human being was inside the pot. After almost six hours, Mani emerged from the pot, and walked around the gallery slowly, imitating the movements of a cow. Before curling up in the pot, Mani mixed food colours with water to enable himself to be covered in a paste that resembled biryani masala. Mani's body replaced the rice and meat of the biryani. His otherwise naked 'Dalit black body' was only covered with a *thorthu* or *loincloth*, a reference to his ancestors who wore this cloth to plough agricultural fields. In covering himself with food colours, he created an aesthetic that resembled biryani eating practices. When he emerged from the pot, these colours covered his body, slowly dripping onto the floor as he walked through the gallery space. Mani described his body arising from the pot as 'not really a human body…but it was like the body of a cow'.[357] His body, then, seems to

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[356] Shoaib Daniyal, 'Maharashtra's Beef Ban Shows How Politicians Manipulate Hindu Sentiments around Cow Slaughter', *Scroll*, accessed 18 June 2022, http://scroll.in/article/711064/maharashtras-beef-ban-shows-how-politicians-manipulate-hindu-sentiments-around-cow-slaughter.

[357] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 7, 2021, transcript with author

have directly invoked a cow; in fact, he stated that he carefully observed the movements of a cow before the performance in order to enact them in their true capacity.[358]

Similarly, Mani's #*MakeInIndia* (see Fig.3.4) also embodies the cow, alluding to the ploughing of the field by his Dalit ancestors who Mani calls 'beasts of burden'.[359] This performance began as a social-media experiment where Mani asked his Facebook audience to share videos and images of what they thought was 'made in India'. Eventually, the Facebook experiment developed into a performative piece where Mani put forth his understanding of the concept of 'make in India' at the Dhaka Art Summit in 2016, as part of the *Performance Pavilion- Shifting Sands Sifting Hands* curated by Nikhil Chopra, Madhavi Gore and Jana Prepeluh.[360] The title of the work by Mani is a play on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Make in India' campaign which called for an Indian state that could produce everything internally. Mani's performance questions this notion of internal production by the Indian state, proclaiming it masculine and patriarchal. Instead, Mani contends that India only produces fear and hate rather than actual commodities or investments.[361]

In the performance, Mani once again wore a *thorthu,* directly invoking the clothes of his Dalit ancestors. Mani began the performance by entering the pavilion space wearing a red cone-shaped helmet and carrying a plough. On the wall behind him, the words 'Make in India' were handwritten. During the performance, Mani struggled to walk around with the heavy plough and helmet, and eventually keeled over from its weight. As he fell, he injured himself and blood was visible on his foot. Though this was unplanned, Mani felt that the drawing of blood reflected the themes of pain, endurance and suffering that he was trying to convey in this

[358] The description of this performance is based on my interview with Sajan Mani and my email exchanges with Mort Chatterjee of Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai, where *Beef Project* was performed.

[359] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author

[360] See the Curatorial Statement for *Performance Pavilion – Shifting Sands Sifting Hands,* in the Dhaka Art Summit, 2016, https://www.samdani.com.bd/performance-pavilion-shifting-sands-sifting-hands-2016. Sajan Mani's performance was part of this pavilion, which focused on themes like the notion of becoming and the use of body as material in performative art.

[361] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author

performance. The shape of the helmet is reflective of *Punnapra-Vayalar,* a memorial for the 1946 Communist insurgency in Travancore, Kerala. This recalling of a particular shape is drawn from visits to this memorial as a child by Mani where it made a strong impact and was retained by him in what he terms 'visual memory'.[362] The red seen in this performance is a reference to the Communist insurgency as well as to *Theyyam*, a performance in Kerala that pays tribute to stories of heroes and ancestry, using dance, mime and music. It is noteworthy that Mani was inspired by a dance form that told stories of ancestry, as through this work, the laments and cries of his own ancestors are highlighted. The redness of the blood was an additional element to the work's overall red visuality and was in stark contrast to the white of the pavilion's wall.

Mani's use of red is also visible in his performance *Art will never die, but COW?* (see Fig.3.5)*,* initially presented at the India Art Fair (IAF) in 2019. The initial 2019 performance was a comment on the apolitical nature of the Indian gallery sector. Through the work's title and actual performance, Mani was interested in impressing upon viewers the idea that the gallery space in India is dominated by 'Brahmanical knowledge production'.[363] Mani began his IAF performance outside the art fair on the roads of New Delhi; this was to democratise viewership and ensure visibility to those who could not afford a ticket to IAF. Donning cow headgear and a red cow's tail and *thorthu*, he walked as if on four legs through the New Delhi streets and made his way to the IAF space. Embodying the cow through his entire performance, his entrance to the actual space of the IAF was difficult. Security guards were confused about letting a 'cow' inside and were unsure of whether this performance required to be paused and then continued inside in the space in which it was meant to be acted. In addition to being the

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[362] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author

[363] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author. Mani refers to this knowledge production as being specifically 'Brahmanical'; it is essentially in line with my use of the phrase 'upper caste' and its connotations of privilege.

cow, Mani was also carrying cow dung, which caused confusion in terms of being allowed through security.[364] Eventually, Mani entered the space as part of his performance. On entering the space, Mani arranged the cow dung cakes and then performed as a two-legged cow, writing Malayalam script on the wall, similar to his *Alphabet of Touch. Art will never die, but COW?* was subsequently made into a video installation and exhibited in Sydney in 2022 (see Fig.3.6) as part of the show *Earth 200CE* with artist Kirtika Kain. Here, Mani is seen donning similar cow headgear but wearing a shirt and trousers instead of the *thorthu*. He moves up and down, holding the cow headgear on top of his head, in a motion that resembles squats. The video is played on loop, ensuring that the squat is something that is continuous and not broken into segments.[365]

The three performances by Mani highlight his particular embodiment of the cow, based on his direct observations of the cow's animal nature. As Mani stated in his interview, these observations, while consciously making up part of the approach to his practice, also stem from his childhood memories of interacting with cows. When Mani invokes the cow in his work, he is mindful of the symbolic meaning the cow carries for the Indian people as a divine mother and goddess, but he draws primarily from his personal relationship to the cow as being domestic.[366] To clarify here, the domestication of the cow is not in terms of the cow being a pet, but rather the reciprocal nature of cow and human often found in India, where the cow is playmate and friend, yet also a provider of sustenance to the family. This reflects the idea of relatedness that encompasses relationships of human and cow such as Mani's in India.

This chapter considers an approach to reading performances like Mani's in the context of caste and the cow. Mani's performances highlight the complexities of caste and its social

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[364] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author

[365] Anisha Palat, curatorial statement displayed in *Earth 200CE* exhibit, Verge Gallery, University of Sydney, 31 March 2022 to 29 April 2022.

[366] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author

hierarchies in Kerala, as well as in India. His work points to issues of food, labour and space, and the way in which caste drives these notions. Since his work involves an active performance of his own body as a cow to underline these notions, the cow's animality also becomes active in his work, drawing attention to Mani's embodiment of an aesthetic ecology. This chapter shows that in order to read such performances, a consideration of caste, issues of food, labour, space, and the cow in its relatedness to Mani, is necessary. Additionally, since these performances are not recorded, Mani's descriptions of his own work are crucial to my analysis.

The chapter first looks at the use of Mani's body as a medium and his embodiment of the cow. Second, the chapter contextualises the politics of food and caste in relation to beef. Third, the chapter examines caste and labour practices as particularities in North Kerala. Finally, the chapter considers art spaces as repositories of upper caste knowledge and display. The chapter argues that Mani disrupts the notions of food, labour, and space in relation to caste in the contexts of Kerala and India. In order to disrupt these issues of caste, Mani performs as a cow and uses his body as a medium to question the hierarchies of caste.

Embodiment: The Use of Body as Medium

To fully understand Mani's performance and his use of body, an exploration of his inspiration from the dance form Theyyam is important. Theyyam is a centuries old, religious folk dance ritual performed annually between the months of December and February in Kerala, India. Theyyam is largely performed in North Kerala, in the district of Kannur, where Mani is originally from. Mani grew up watching Theyyam performances, as they are part of the cultural thread of Northern Kerala. *Theyyam* translates to *daivam* or *god*. As William Dalrymple elaborates in his study on Theyyam, the folk dance ritual is a performance where *Theyyakarans* or *dancers*, all from lower castes, are possessed by a god. One *Theyyakaran* describes being possessed by a deity:

It's like a blinding light…When the drums are playing and your make-up is finished, they hand you a mirror and you look at your face, transformed into that of a god. Then it comes. It's as if there is a sudden explosion of light. A vista of complete brilliance opens up – it blinds the senses…That light stays with you all the way through the performance. You become the deity. You lose all fear. Even your voice changes. The god comes alive and takes over. You are just the vehicle, the medium. In the trance it is God who speaks, and all the acts are the acts of the god – feeling, thinking, speaking. The dancer is an ordinary man, but this being is divine. Only when the headdress is removed does it end.[367]

With the spirit of a god having entered their bodies, the dancers perform through the night as a manifestation of that god. The performer is only the vehicle or medium for the deity; this is particularly important in Sajan Mani's performances where his body is the medium for the cow.

Theyyam performances involve rituals and stories, and the narratives in these performances often question the caste system and social hierarchies that arise from this system. Often, the gods are represented as shocked by the atrocities of caste.[368] Since the narratives explicitly enact suffering and trauma, which are otherwise not discussed as part of the caste system in Kerala, Theyyam serves as an important tool of expression and meaning making. The vibrant costumes, music, drumbeats, songs, and face and body paint, are similar to other temple associated performative arts in Kerala like Kathakali.[369] Unlike Kathakali, Theyyam does not have a fixed composition and narrative and is driven by the possessed body of the performer, dancing as the god on earth.[370] It is crucial to note that in Theyyam, an action of performance is not taking place. In other words, it is not the performer becoming the character

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[367] William Dalrymple, 'The Dancer of Kannur', in *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, by William Dalrymple (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 31.

[368] See Dalrymple, 'The Dancer of Kannur', 39-41 for the story of Shankaracharya and his interactions with Lord Shiva who poses as a Dalit. Shankaracharya first shouts at Lord Shiva, mistaking him for a drunk man who is obstructing his path. A string of verbal abuse against Lord Shiva as the drunk man ensues, as Shankaracharya believes the 'drunk' is a Dalit who has no right to be in his way. Eventually, Lord Shiva breaks his guise and Shankaracharya is ashamed for having shouted at the god. Lord Shiva instructs Shankaracharya that he must not hurl verbal abuse at anyone, no matter their caste. This story is performed as a Theyyam dance every year in Kannur district.

[369] Shaima Ahammed, 'Caste-Based Oppression, Trauma and Collective Victimhood in Erstwhile South India: The Collective Therapeutic Potential of Theyyam', *Psychology and Developing Societies, SAGE* 31, no. 1 (2019): 96, https://doi.org/10.1177/0971333618825051.

[370] Dalrymple, 'The Dancer of Kannur', 44-45.

of the god in a ritual. Rather, the performer embodies a god by inviting the god to enter his body, 'assuming a fierce and raging yet benevolent power of the deity or God'.[371]

The performers of Theyyam are largely from Dalit communities. The inversion of the social hierarchy that is the caste system is particularly interesting in the season when Theyyam is performed. Here, a reversal of roles is initiated where the gods, though associated with the upper castes for the rest of the year, inhabit the bodies of those considered the lowest in the caste order. Since the lower castes then become 'part-time gods', the upper castes seek their blessings and favour during this period.[372] The entire system of Theyyam is in fact free from upper caste control—even the performances take place in landscapes and shrines that are not part of upper caste environments.

Dilip Menon shows that Theyyam is an example of a 'shared artefact' between castes;[373] Mani's inspiration of Theyyam then places his performances in the same space. The discussion of Mani's performances in the context of caste in Kerala is important in terms of understanding the meanings generated by shared artefacts between the different castes. In other words, Mani's performances derive from a place of shared artefacts where there is a conversation between stories of different castes and their experiences. Theyyam specifically narrates stories concerning both lower and upper caste people. Often, these stories talk of infringements of caste restrictions and other breaches of morality between lower and upper caste groups, resulting in a person's (usually lower caste person) death. The stories in Theyyam enable lower caste performers to enact the violence of the punishments unfairly given to them by upper castes. Lower caste performers are able to enact these stories, even though they admonish upper castes, because lower castes now represent the divine form as they become

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[371] Ahammed, 'Caste-Based Oppression, Trauma and Collective Victimhood in Erstwhile South India', 96.
[372] Dalrymple, 'The Dancer of Kannur', 33.
[373] Dilip M. Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam: Popular Culture in Late Colonial Malabar', *Studies in History* 9, no. 2 (August 1993): 188, https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309300900203.

possessed by the deity. As a shared artefact, Theyyam became a 'symbolic strategy' where community driven efforts between different caste groups could be established.[374] As Dilip Menon argues, 'by necessitating the deification of victims, it created a collective imagination of what was just and unjust'.[375] By deifying the victims of violence of an oppressive caste system, Theyyam allowed for retribution and a shared space of a 'pantheon of deities shared by all castes'.[376] Therefore, Theyyam was an attempt to eliminate all divisions between castes. In creating this inversion of the traditional caste social hierarchy, Northern Kerala was a unique space to understand caste.[377] It had the most stringent and violent laws, but at the same time, the laws were sometimes inverted. Symbolic strategies like Theyyam allowed for a criticism of the violence perpetrated by caste that questioned the systems of social hierarchy that drove society in this part of India.

In India, performance art, though late to be recognised formally as a category within art history, was always present especially in the form of dance and theatre (including street theatre performances). Unlike theatre, performances in art do not carry the burden of presenting a story or narrative. The power of performance art in contemporary Indian art practice is that it often derives from these older forms. Artists like Sajan Mani use their body as the primary medium in performance, and thereby present a direct engagement with their viewers, creating a 'palpable charge between artist and viewing public'.[378] As Rakhee Balaram notes, the advantage of using the body as a medium to convey a larger message is that the language of the body can be understood no matter the differences in language and region: 'in a time of media distillation and technological modes of communication, the body continues to have a

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[374] Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam', 189.
[375] Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam', 190.
[376] Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam', 192.
[377] Drawing from scholars like Dilip Menon and the lived experiences of Sajan Mani, I suggest that Northern Kerala is sometimes considered unique in the context of caste due to the prevalence of art forms like Theyyam.
[378] Rakhee Balaram, 'Exit Wounds: Practice and Politics of Performance Art in India', in *20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary*, ed. Parul Dave Mukherji, Rakhee Balaram, and Partha Mitter (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022), 424.

presence in India because of its long-standing religious traditions, and the way in which it can be coded as both mundane and divine.'[379]

Mani's use of the body is indeed both mundane and divine in his embodiments of the cow. The mundane stems from the simplicity of engaging with the cow's animality, while the divine is linked to the cow as Kamadhenu. In employing an essence of both the mundane and divine in his work, Mani's body is of particular importance to the understanding of his practice. Bodily exertion, for most performance practitioners, is taxing—for instance, in being curled up inside the biryani pot for several hours, Mani put his own body through physical pain and trauma. Similarly, in injuring himself in #MakeInIndia, he again directly suffered a wound.

In Mani's embodiment of the cow, the influence of Theyyam is seen in his attempt to become the cow-as-animal rather than only use the cow-as-image. The embodiment of a cow by Mani, though stemming from the Theyyam tradition, is not equivalent to becoming possessed by a cow in the way that Theyyam performers become 'part-time gods'. Mani is not a part-time cow; he is not directly inculcated with the cow's animality or divinity. Through his performances, though Mani behaves *like* a cow in different forms—as meat, on an agricultural field, and as a cow roaming the streets—the cow's animality is not foregrounded inside his body and he does not become a cow.

Alexis Shotwell observes that to be embodied is 'to be placed, sustained, affected by the world, and in turn to affect the world'.[380] Embodiment involves a oneness with a body and being 'affected by the world': in Mani's case, this stems from the oppression and caste-based violence faced by his ancestors who Mani calls beasts of burden in the field. The suffering faced by Mani's 'Dalit grandfathers' as 'beasts of burden' is a suffering he embodies in his

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[379] Balaram, 'Exit Wounds: Practice and Politics of Performance Art in India', 424.

[380] Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis, United States: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 107, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ed/detail.action?docID=4525960.

performances.[381] This suffering is at one level a direct invocation of the suffering and pain felt by his ancestors—his choice to wear a *thorthu,* carry a plough, and bear pain from a direct infliction of injury, all reflect the embodiment of ancestral pain. The suffering also reflects that his ancestors were treated as beasts of burden, or in other words, treated the same way animals like cows and bulls in the field are treated. In the Introduction, I compared this to the way in which race and the animal question have been studied, where the treatment of slaves is compared in *likeness* to the treatment of animals. Eventually, in being embodied by this ancestral pain and suffering, Mani's body, through his performances that both exemplify the suffering of ancestral pain and the suffering of caste and the animal, is affected by the world and also affects the world.

To draw a comparison in terms of animality and performance, one could examine Russian artist Oleg Kulik's adopted dog persona in his piece *I Bite America and America Bites Me* (1997). Oleg Kulik's performance as a dog 'internalizes the human-animal relationship'.[382] For instance, the olfactory nature of the stench of urine and faeces, present in the enclosure in which Kulik lives as a dog, is part of highlighting the dog's animal nature. The way Kulik behaves, attacking and biting entrants to the enclosure, is reminiscent of a guard dog's nature.[383] Kulik's work was a challenge to Joseph Beuys' *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) where Beuys lived with a coyote for three consecutive days (eight hours per day). While Beuys externalised the human-animal relationship by making it visible, Kulik's immersion as animal was unique. By internalising the human-animal relationship, Kulik emphasises animality.

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[381] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author
[382] Mila Bredikhina and Oleg Kulik, 'The Lessons of Stockholm,' *Siksi* 3, no.82 (1996) in Jim Drobnick, 'Oleg Kulik: Zoophrenic Odors', *The Senses and Society* 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 143, https://doi.org/10.2752/174589206778055574.
[383] Jim Drobnick, 'Oleg Kulik: Zoophrenic Odors', *The Senses and Society* 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 141–48, https://doi.org/10.2752/174589206778055574.

In his imitations of the cow, Mani seems to draw from both Beuys and Kulik. In Beuys' performance, one could argue that a relatedness occurs between artist and coyote through the act of living together. However, Mani's relatedness to the cow is not a forced interaction, but rather a natural outcome of his childhood experiences in Kerala. Mani uses his relatedness to the cow in order to imitate its behaviour, but not fully become the cow. This is where his performance differs from that of Kulik's who immersed himself in the behaviour of a dog by becoming the dog. Therefore, Mani both internalises and externalises the human-cow relationship by relying on his relatedness to the cow as a natural process of relationship between human and animal living together in India.

In the widely cited text *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988) by Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of 'becoming-animal' is relevant to both Kulik and Mani's performances. Deleuze and Guattari suggest an intensification of the human experience as becoming other than what they are in relation to the manner in which this change occurs. In other words, to 'uproot one from humanity', the becoming of another helps escape the limitations of the self.[384] In Kulik's work, he embodies 'zoophrenia' where animals are 'the non-anthropomorphic alter-egos of humans'.[385] Zoophrenia interrogates the relationship between human and animal at a psychological and cultural level—Kulik the dog straddles the line between the psychological dog in the way he behaves, and the cultural symbolisms of the dog as a guard (in Kulik's iteration). Kulik escapes the limitations of his human self in his encompassment of the psychological and cultural implications of a dog. Mani's performance as cow is somewhat limited by the human body in that the cow-as-image is his driving choice for his reason to perform as cow. But he escapes these limitations in the relatedness to the cow he experienced through his life and embodies a zoophrenia like Kulik in that the relationship between human

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[384] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 240, in Drobnick, 'Oleg Kulik', 145.
[385] Drobnick, 'Oleg Kulik', 145.

and cow is interrogated at a psychological and cultural level of caste and its associated violence. Since these observations took place at a subconscious level while Mani grew up with cows, as well as at a conscious level to observe for these performances, Mani's performances that include cows are 'forms of what are most readily described as imitation' and this imitation appears 'central to art's exploration of the animal'.[386] Deleuze and Guattari strongly criticised imitation: 'no art is imitative, no art can be imitative'.[387] Mani's invocation of the cow seems to be 'a version of the imitator or gesturer' wherein his cow stands for a human problem of caste.[388] However, because of the relatedness of cow and human in India, the framing of a 'human' problem of caste is actually Mani's way of showing a mutualisation of caste and the cow through his active performance as the cow. By actively performing as the cow, Mani highlights this relatedness and shows that his embodiment of the cow is true to the relationship between human and cow in India.

Food and Caste

Thinking on food practices in India has highlighted that the relationship between Indian food systems and social systems is deeply layered and complex.[389] There are many underlying tensions that encompass food eating and food choice in India. For this section, I will concentrate on the role of beef in Indian food discussion and illustrate why Mani's choice of presenting *Beef Project* is particularly potent.

India's geographical diversity and religious and cultural multiplicity have resulted in many different food practices and food choices among communities. Particularly important to

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[386] Steve Baker, 'Sloughing the Human'. *Performance Research* 5, no. 2 (January 2000): 78. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2000.10871732.
[387] Deleuze and Guattari in Baker, 'Sloughing the Human', 78.
[388] Baker, 'Sloughing the Human', 79.
[389] I have already explored Ambedkar's views on the subject of beef eating and caste. Some other scholars who have written on food in India are Arjun Appadurai, Balmurli Natarajan, Hugo Gorringe, D. Karthikeyan, Dolly Kikon, Shraddha Chigateri, Gopal Guru, and even artist Rajyashri Goody, to name a few.

these choices is the difference between being a vegetarian and non-vegetarian in India. This is quite different from the way this is understood globally. In India, a vegetarian might be a strict vegetarian, only consuming vegetables, but also consuming animal products like milk. Another vegetarian might consume vegetables and egg, which falls in a grey zone of the vegetarian and non-vegetarian binary. Non-vegetarians, too, range in the types of meat they consume—for instance, some might only consume poultry, some only seafood, and most significantly, and most relevant to this chapter, some might consume all animal meat except beef.[390] Non-vegetarians encompass those who eat egg, fish, meat, or a combination of these. Vegetarians consume vegetables and also milk, even though the product is from an animal. Of course, non-vegetarian as a category cannot be homogenised in India for cultural factors like religion and caste are determinants of the particularities of a non-vegetarian diet.[391] Numbers from a Government of India study (2014) showed that two-thirds of the respondents of this survey identified as non-vegetarian,[392] proving that the presupposition that India is a vegetarian nation is false.[393]

Though India is globally known to be largely vegetarian, this notion is a loose term. Tracing the behaviour back to colonial times, the differences in diets between the British and Indians was marked by a meat-based diet of the 'exotic' outsiders in contrast to the Indian diet which also included several plants but was not limited to only plants.[394] Additionally, a review of food patterns was undertaken at this time, and this revealed a cereal (and not vegetable) based diet for Indians, which was in contrast and considered inferior to the meat-based diet of the British. Even though many other national level resistances emerged in response to colonial

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[390] There is a similar argument to be made about pork but this is outside the scope of this chapter.

[391] C Sathyamala, 'Meat-Eating in India: Whose Food, Whose Politics, and Whose Rights?', *Policy Futures in Education* 17, no. 7 (October 2019): 879, https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210318780553.

[392] Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner India, 'India - Sample Registration System (SRS)-Statistical Report 2014', accessed 19 June 2023, https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/34787.

[393] Sathyamala, 'Meat-Eating in India', 883.

[394] Arnold D, 'The 'discovery' of malnutrition and diet in colonial India', *The Indian Economic and Social history Review* 31, no.1 (1994): 1–26 in Sathyamala, 'Meat-Eating in India', 880.

rule, proving that India was a meat-eating country was not one of these resistances. Instead, the cow was mobilised as a tool of collective Hindu identity based on the fact that Hindus did not consume meat.[395] As Parama Roy posits, 'the stomach served as a kind of somatic political unconscious in which the phantasmagoria of colonialism came to be embodied'.[396] I extend this stomaching to a 'phantasmagoria' of caste too, which is linked to a disgust of meat and particularly beef by Hindu upper castes.

Mahatma Gandhi's views on meat-eating mirror this Hindu identity—his upper caste outlook was that all flesh-eating is damaging, but particularly the consumption of beef was evil. Here, caste outlooks pervade food and in turn social hierarchies. Gandhi targeted Dalits (whom he called *Harijans* or *people of god*) and attempted to convince them to give up the consumption of the cow. In response, B. R. Ambedkar noted:

> Even a superficial view of the food taboos of the Hindus will show that there are two taboos regarding food which serve as dividing lines. There is one taboo against meat-eating. It divides Hindus into vegetarians and flesh-eaters. There is another taboo which is against beef-eating. It divides Hindus into those who eat cow's flesh and those who do not. From the point of view of untouchability the first dividing line is of no importance. But the second is. For it completely marks off the Touchables from the Untouchables.[397]

Thus, Ambedkar illustrated that the hierarchy of food amongst Hindu Indians, especially with regard to the consumption of beef, was reflected in the social hierarchy of the caste system and its divisions. Additionally, a further divide even amongst beef eaters was visible—those who ate the flesh of a freshly slaughtered cow and those who ate the flesh of an already dead cow.

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[395] I have spoken about this in Chapter One, when discussing calendar imagery and the cow.

[396] Parama Roy, *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7, in Sushmita Chatterjee and Banu Subramaniam, 'How to Think with Meat', in *Meat!*, ed. Sushmita Chatterjee and Banu Subramaniam (Duke University Press, 2021), 4, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012481-001.

[397] Excerpted from Chapter Ten to Fourteen of Ambedkar's 1948 work *The Untouchables: Who were they? And why they became Untouchables?* in Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 185.

The consumption of the flesh of a dead cow as carrion was the marker by which lower castes were considered more polluted.

Arjun Appadurai's contention that consumption practices act as 'the semiotic instrument of Hindu ideas of rank and distance' helps articulate the relationship between food practices and caste in India.[398] The social hierarchies of caste are maintained significantly through food. Food, simply put, is something consumed for sustenance. But controlling food choices of certain groups in society has enabled casteism to thrive in India. This control is linked to religion, and to the consumption of the cow as a sacred being. Additionally, the handling of the cow carcass, relegated to lower castes, is also linked to caste. As C. Sathyamala argues, the upper caste Hindu vegetarianism is not based on a care for the cow or on non-violence towards the animal. Rather, it is based on the divisions of caste, and ensures that caste hierarchies exist in contemporary society.[399] In an Indian context of upper caste Hinduism, vegetarianism is just 'caste by other means', perpetrated to ensure social hierarchies today.[400]

The relation of caste and food politics extends to domestic and public spaces. Vegetarian and non-vegetarian consumers in the same dining space is a concept often looked down upon by upper castes. For instance, in 2014, a notice was issued to employees of *The Hindu* newspaper office in Chennai, requesting that non-vegetarian food not be brought into the office canteen so as to avoid discomfort to the majority of vegetarian employees. While this might appear as though it is a polite reminder to be understanding of one's colleagues, the premise of a 'strictly vegetarian atmosphere' in India is 'caste by other means'.[401] As Gorringe

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[398] Arjun Appadurai, 'Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia', *American Ethnologist*, 8, no 3 (1980): 497 in Hugo Gorringe and D Karthikeyan, 'The Hidden Politics of Vegetarianism: Caste and "The Hindu" Canteen', *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 20 (2014): 20.
[399] Sathyamala, 'Meat-Eating in India', 886.
[400] M. S. S. Pandian, 'One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere', *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 18 (2002): 1735.
[401] Pandian, 'One step outside modernity: Caste, identity politics and public sphere', 1735.

and Damodaran show, the majority of Hindu employees being vegetarian in fact shows that a brahmin culture appears to dominate the Tamil press. While the discussion here is not about the demographics of employees, the example of the Hindu canteen and its notice shows the way food is linked to caste, and that decoding the idea of vegetarian in India is linked to choices of food by different castes. Essentially, the incident at the Hindu offices in Chennai shows that 'brahmanical codes determine the dietary practices' of employees there.[402] This serves as a reference for larger understandings of taste in India and the way upper caste codes determine food choices and what is considered 'tasteful' and 'distasteful' in India. The norms that dictate taste are upper caste, thus ensuring that food practices and choices of lower castes are looked down upon.

This sense of superiority and hierarchy often results in violent attacks on those who both consume and handle beef (and pork). Sambaiah Gundimeda discusses a separate beef stall in relation to the larger cultural politics of food and caste, especially within educational institutes in India. [403] In mentioning educational institutes, the larger picture of beef consumption and its associated taboos become clear, since educational institutes bring together diverse populations. University campuses around India do not have beef on their canteen menus, but students on these campuses consume beef, sometimes in secret. Code words are sometimes employed within close circles of friends to suggest beef eating. Barring the states of Kerala and some in the Northeast, beef consumption is frowned upon and violence against those who consume beef is legitimised. [404] In order to assert food rights and choices, marginalised groups in universities have organised 'beef festivals' to resist the pervasive upper

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[402] Gorringe and Karthikeyan, 'The Hidden Politics of Vegetarianism', 21.
[403] Sambaiah Gundimeda, 'Democratisation of the Public Sphere: The Beef Stall Case in Hyderabad's Sukoon Festival', *South Asia Research* 29, no. 2 (2009): 127–49.
[404] Gundimeda, 'Democratisation of the Public Sphere: The Beef Stall Case in Hyderabad's Sukoon Festival'.

caste norm that is against the consumption of beef. For instance, Sambaiah Gundimeda explains the history behind what became a 'beef festival' in her University of Hyderabad campus:

> The Dalit Students Union, a few months before the *Sukoon* Festival in 2006 … argued that the food in the stalls did not represent the cultural diversity of the university community, comprising students, teaching and non-teaching staff of the university, and was simply another manifestation of the hegemony of the upper castes and their culture. The university, as a public institution, it was further argued, should not allow its public space to be colonized by a particular culture. Instead, it should ensure that space is shared equally by every culture of the university community. In short, the cultural festival of the university should represent the many cultures of Indian society. As a step towards equality in representation, the Dalit Students Union demanded that it should be allowed to set up a beef stall in the *Sukoon* festival. It was argued that beef constitutes an important part of the food habits of dalits and is thus part and parcel of Dalit culture. Besides, such food culture is equally shared by Muslims and a few others from caste Hindu cultural backgrounds. The administration, the executive body of the university, was "irritated," to quote one of the Dalit Students Union delegates, by this request and instantly denied permission for the stall on the grounds that "consumption of beef… (in the campus) creates caste and communal tensions".[405]

Gundimeda's explanation shows the taboos surrounding beef consumption in India. Even though this was an example from Hyderabad, similar instances took place in Chennai (IIT Madras) and Delhi (JNU). It is crucial here that beef eating is considered taboo because it is linked to the sacred cow. However, most Indians who consume beef in fact consume buffalo meat, which then reinforces the idea that it is the cow-as-image that is constantly being protected in India.

In Chapter One, in line with the cow-as-image, I discussed the implementation of a ban against cow-slaughter in the Indian constitution. This ban was accorded as a Directive Principle of State Policy, therefore allowing each state to decide whether they would implement a ban on cow slaughter. There are several debates regarding the so-called 'secular garb' of cow slaughter as part of Article 48 in the Constitution. Article 48 supports a ban against cow slaughter without the actual imposition—in this ambiguity, the 'figure of the sacred cow slips between religion and secularism', and this links its 'image' to the 'mutilated flesh of disposed

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[405] Shepherd, 'Freedom to Eat: The Fight for Beef as a Democratic Right'.

and disposable cattle in the realm of Dalit life'.[406] Accordingly, Article 48 was formulated post-Independence (after 1947) but the history of eating cows by even upper castes extends to ancient India.[407] The embedded nature of cows in the caste system is partly due to the ruling of courts in terms of the hereditary professions of butchery and leather tanning. If the court were to deny an individual right to practice a hereditary profession, the logic of caste hierarchy would then be dismantled. Therefore, the courts then legitimise caste through profession, even though the said profession might be in opposition to other beliefs of the state (like cow protection).[408]

It is evident from the above discussion that meat, and particularly meat as beef in India, is a site of constant tension in hierarchy and choice linked largely to caste practices. As Banu Subramaniam notes, contemporary Indian discussions on beef have become 'a politics of pitting animal life against human politics, and for humans, a politics of life and death'.[409] I follow Chatterjee and Subramaniam's suggestion that meat is a 'critical site, mobile and porous, where multiple political debates cohere'.[410] This suggestion forms the crux of why Mani's performance *Beef Project* is so potent—the performance as meat serves as a critical site for a discussion on the scales of meat, life, death, national politics, the animal, and the body. Placing a ban on beef in a global study on vegan food advocacy would erase the links of food in India to caste identity. In Mani's performances, it is crucial to look at beef as a 'critical site' for discussion of caste and the animal, and the way these two hierarchies can productively come together. It is noteworthy that Mani performed in Maharashtra, where even the mere possession

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[406] Shraddha Chigateri, 'Negotiating the 'Sacred' Cow: Cow Slaughter and the Regulation of Difference in India,' in *Democracy, Religious Pluralism and the Liberal Dilemma of Accommodation*, edited by Monica Mookherjee, 137–159 (New York: Springer, 2011) in Jason Sunder, 'Religious Beef: Dalit Literature, Bare Life, and Cow Protection in India', *Interventions* 21, no. 3 (3 April 2019): 339, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2018.1558097.
[407] Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*.
[408] Jason Sunder, 'Religious Beef: Dalit Literature, Bare Life, and Cow Protection in India', *Interventions* 21, no. 3 (3 April 2019): 341.
[409] Banu Subramaniam, 'The Ethical Impurative: Elemental Frontiers of Technologized Meat', in *Meat!: A Transnational Analysis*, ed. Sushmita Chatterjee and Banu Subramaniam (Duke University Press, 2021), 260, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012481.
[410] Sushmita Chatterjee and Banu Subramaniam, 'How to Think with Meat', in *Meat!*, ed. Sushmita Chatterjee and Banu Subramaniam (Duke University Press, 2021), 1, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012481-001.

of beef is a crime by law. Further, in Maharashtra, DNA kits to check whether it is cow meat or other meat are popular.[411] However, in Kerala, Mani's home state, beef is part of the regional cuisine for a large part of the population, even those who are Hindus. In Mani's performance, he manages to reconfigure the idea of beef as a form of power in his embodiment of the cow. He celebrates his identity as one who eats beef from a state (Kerala) where beef eating is not problematic and performs in a state (Maharashtra) where beef eating can be cause for imprisonment.

Mani's body then seems to stand for several things: a piece of meat in a full pot of biryani, a moving cow emerging triumphantly alive despite being cooked, and finally a framing of caste and inherited burden and the consumption of beef by specific communities through the notion of a Dalit body. Does the emergence of an alive 'body of the cow' as a human body then triumphantly erase the pain borne by the cow in its death? How do we address the pain of Mani's Dalit ancestors, ostracised for consuming beef, yet left only the rotten carcasses of dead cows? It is interesting that Mani chose to represent beef biryani as opposed to any other food. Biryani, an extremely popular dish in India, perhaps speaks to the larger community about food consumption. In fact, when Mani advertised the work on social media asking people to come enjoy 'beef biryani' with him at the gallery, he received messages cautioning him against such a vividly provocative piece.[412] This fear of openly consuming beef has resulted in the coding of beef in contemporary India. For instance, in Hyderabad Central University, Kalyani Biryani has become a code word for beef biryani.[413]

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[411] Farhan Shaikh, 'Beef Ban: Maharashtra to Get "Detection Kits" to Identify Meat within 30 Minutes', *Hindustan Times*, 7 July 2017, https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/beef-ban-maharashtra-to-get-detection-kits-to-identify-meat-within-30-minutes/story-1tOo6eWkQRdsyeCT05tgZJ.html.
[412] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 7, 2021, transcript with author.

[413] Nagaraju Gundemeda, 'Food Choices and Social Distinctions among University Students in Hyderabad', *South Asia Research* 40, no. 3 (November 2020): 344–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728020944279.

Rajayshri's Goody's (b.1990) work *Lal Bhaaji* (2019) (see <u>Fig.3.7</u>) presents a similar exploration of food and caste, especially with regard to the politics of beef and meat for Dalits.[414] *Lal Bhaaji* essentially translates to the common leafy red and green plant (spinach) and is commonly used as the term for this vegetable in Maharashtra. However, Goody's reference to *Lal Bhaaji* is based on the codification of the term by Dalits; this was the term commonly used to convey that they were consuming beef by pretending that the beef was in fact the red spinach or *Lal Bhaaji.* The constant hiding of their actual food choices by Dalits was common practice then and continues to this day. It is against the law to consume beef in Maharashtra even today, thereby driving communities who do eat beef to pretend it is something else. Goody's work brings this narrative of secrecy linked to the shame of eating beef for Dalit communities to life in her work and tells the story of *Lal Bhaaji,* something her ancestors commonly ate. Goody stated that she has never seen what the preparation of beef looked like so her rendition of *Lal Bhaaji* is based on stories from family as well as her own reading of Dalit literature. As there is no singular Dalit cuisine and Goody's family has long since turned vegetarian (as have several other Dalit individuals), Goody's *Lal Bhaaji* is based on her own imagination.[415] The materials Goody has used to recreate *Lal Bhaaji* are ceramic pieces of meat, pooris and bones as well as Manusmriti pulp. The realistic way in which the meat has been rendered to look like beef is striking, especially embedded within the context of what meat means for a Dalit. Most striking is the use of Manusmriti pulp to stuff the bones as well as a background. The fact that Goody has taken the Manusmriti, the root of the Dalit communities' discrimination, and made it to use her words an 'active' ingredient of the Lal Bhaaji reflects new associations with beef, ones that glorify courage and bravery, not shame and helplessness. The artwork itself then becomes an act of resistance against the caste system

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[414] *Lal Bhaaji* was one of the accompanying illustrations for *The Caravan* magazine article on beef by Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd.

[415] Rajyashri Goody, interview by author, Online, July 30, 2021, transcript with author, and Rajyashri Goody, *Lal Bhaaji*, 2019, Manusmriti paper pulp, ceramics, 2019, <u>http://www.rajyashrigoody.com/lal-bhaaji</u>.

and Manu's laws, using food as the tool to do so. This is similar to Mani's use of his body as meat in *Beef Project,* where his body as beef becomes a tool of resisting the notion of beef consumption.

Thinking in line with Sushmita Chatterjee where meat is a set of 'corporeal politics',[416] Mani's performances embody a politics of food and caste, historical suffering, and death. Additionally, Mani's performances invoke sensorial visuals of colour (the black loincloth, the masala colour dripping off his body) and indirect sensorial ideas of taste (the taste of meat and the taste of biryani). The cow as divine and mother complicates our ideas of 'interactive corporeality',[417] for there is the body of the cow as mother and divine, and the body of Sajan Mani as the cow. The idea that some bodies are always more vulnerable than others holds particular truth here—Mani's 'Dalit black body' as against the body of the holy cow containing gods within her frame are certainly an example of the vulnerability of certain bodies in contrast to other bodies.[418] The cow's body as meat then straddles a fine line of death but then comes alive through Mani's performance.

A ban on beef by certain Indian states is about 'containment of bodies'.[419] This is significant in light of the idea of the 'contained body' and the body as container. The contained body implies a restricted body; certainly, the cow's body is restricted in its death and Dalit bodies are restricted in a ban that removes them from an assertion of their right to eat. In *Beef Project*, Mani's placement of his body inside a pot for so many hours reflects this containment. The body as container, on the other hand, suggests that the body holds a message. The cow's body as container is that it holds a divinity and motherhood. Mani's body then, through his

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[416] Sushmita Chatterjee, 'Beefing Yoga: Meat, Corporeality, and Politics', in *Meat!: A Transnational Analysis*, ed. Sushmita Chatterjee and Banu Subramaniam (Duke University Press, 2021), 96, https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012481.
[417] Chatterjee, 'Beefing Yoga: Meat, Corporeality, and Politics', 97.
[418] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 7, 2021, transcript with author.
[419] Chatterjee, 'Beefing Yoga: Meat, Corporeality, and Politics', 102.

performance and emerging as the cow, calls forth an assertion that his body is now in control, particularly of his rights as a consumer of beef. Where does the animality of the cow then play a role? Mani mentioned his body emerged as a sort of half-human cow. If the cow was dead and then alive, Mani then does acknowledge the cow's animality. Here we see a relatedness in terms of Mani encompassing his right to eat beef, but also in his endearment for the cow-as-animal. In becoming the cow or emerging as a live cow after it has been killed, Mani acknowledges the cow's animality. Mani's performances and using of body as medium then reflect Judith Butler's thinking on the body: 'to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology'.[420]

Carol Adams suggests that beef is the 'dead' meat of the cow, but this status as 'dead' changes as we move through spaces.[421] Following Chatterjee, 'beef' in India is never really dead. Even though the cow is physically dead as beef, the violence and anger that surround the idea of 'beef' shows that the cow as 'image' (which only looks at the live cow) is what is at the forefront of debate. As consumable flesh, meat is perhaps dead, for it does not have an agency to react. Yamini Narayanan's notes on slaughterhouses become pertinent here. On speaking to the man in the slaughterhouse in Kanpur, Narayanan realises that in the killing of the animal:

> there is a stage of *being alive, being dead,* and a *liminal space for dying* between life and death. This space is when an animal dies, *piece by piece,* as the conveyor belt inches forward…anthropologists of religion and secularity note that the state of liminality—the unknown or the uncertain—can be uncomfortable, necessitating the need for clear boundaries. The minutes following the "cut" or the "stunning," where the animal is not-quite-alive-and-not-quite-dead, are emotionally, intellectually, and legislatively difficult to address. In moments where sentience, blood, flesh, and life itself are wildly wavering, it becomes important to draw metaphorical lines.[422]

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[420] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 3, in Chatterjee, 'Beefing Yoga: Meat, Corporeality, and Politics', 107.

[421] Carol J. Adams, The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 20–21.

[422] Narayanan, 'Mother Cow, Mother India', 259-261.

This liminality can be linked to the stories of Theyyam. In these stories which are performed, a victim, dead due to some form of injustice and violence, critiques upper caste communities (who are still living) for having enacted these injustices. Thus, Theyyam could be seen as a formation of a community between the living and the dead. The victims of these injustices are the ones deified as having a 'triumph over death'.[423]

The reference to death in Theyyam is a useful framework from which to understand Mani's performance. This is particularly interesting in light of Sajan Mani's *Beef Project*. There are many stages to making beef biryani—the cow must first be killed to become beef, then someone has to cook the beef with rice, and then it becomes biryani.[424] This mirrors a live cow becoming a food dish containing a dead cow. In Mani's performance, when he emerges from the pot as a fully cooked biryani, is he alive or dead? He describes his body as being a cow and human both. In the act of emerging from a pot, after being cooked (dead), Mani implies that he is alive. So, the reference in Theyyam to a 'triumph over death' then applies to Mani's performance for both the triumph of the cow as live when starting off as dead meat, and the triumph of Mani, as a Dalit, punished for consuming beef.

An ethics of privilege pervades the discussion on animal justice in India. In not harming the cow physically, the privilege of class mobility and luxury becomes apparent. Animal welfare politics is not easily applicable to Indian food politics, but it is important to start with the acknowledgement of the animality of the cow in relation to the dignity of Dalits in having the right to consume the cow.[425] Narayanan notes that *halal* meat is considered 'humane' for once the sacrifice or cut on the neck has been made, the animal is no longer an animal.[426]

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[423] Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam', 204.

[424] I avoid talking about the procurement of the beef in this cycle because that limits the scenario to particular urban or rural settings.

[425] Sunder, 'Religious Beef', 351.

[426] *Halal* food adheres to Islamic law as defined in the Quran.

Additionally, slaughterhouse workers were cognisant of an animal's sensitivity to their imminent death and their subsequent resistance was extremely visible to the workers in these slaughterhouses.[427] This shows that an acknowledgement of animality exists in spaces of death of the cow and among those who are harmed for harming the cow.

In Mani's performance, an acknowledgement of animality and caste highlights a way in which animal welfare politics and food politics can come together productively. However, Mani's embodiment of the cow is still limited to a human outlook, that prioritises caste over the cow's animality. The violent nature of caste in relation to the cow is obviously enough reason for him to enact this priority. In prioritising both, a constructive discussion through art which erases both systems of oppression might be possible. If the animality of the cow is highlighted and the cow is seen as animal over image, an annihilation of caste in the name of the cow (since 'in the name of the cow' only means 'in the name of the cow *as image*'), might be possible.

Labour and Caste

In addition to the issues of food in relation to caste, Mani also problematises caste and labour in Kerala in his performance *#MakeInIndia*. To illustrate this, he likens his ancestors to cows as beasts of burden in the field. This section explores these issues of caste and labour and relates them to Mani's embodiment of the cow as an image or symbol of his ancestral legacy.

A look at the caste system in North Kerala, where Mani's ancestors worked as labourers, is crucial to fully understand this performance. In northern Kerala, centuries of oppression led to an 'internalization of hierarchy and obedience to superiors' resulting in a number of restrictions imposed by upper castes on lower castes.[428] These restrictions included

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[427] Narayanan, 'Mother Cow, Mother India'.
[428] Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam', 187.

proximities of space, and even courtesies of behaviour such as a lower caste bowing their head in the presence of someone upper caste. If these restrictions were disobeyed, upper castes had the authority to even kill those castes that did not listen to them. Therefore, a certain hierarchy was maintained through an exercising of power and violence enacted in the daily life of the lower castes.

Most often, these lower castes were also beholden to upper caste landowners, as they worked for them in the fields and tilled their land. The upper caste landowners were part of a *tharavadu* or *unit of settlement*. Tharavadus are a source of pride among upper caste families in Kerala and these tharavadus owned and controlled a lot of the land, including forests.[429] Tharavadus also enjoyed immense power over the castes that were employed by them, mirroring a feudal system of enslavement. In fact, Mani's descriptions of his Dalit grandfathers being the enslaved people of land-owning castes and treated as beasts of burden on the field, reflects this feudal system.[430] His ancestors were part of plantations in the area of North Kerala.

Tharavadus were dependent on a good crop which in turn depended on their labourers. Since agricultural techniques were not advanced to ensure certainty of crop and plentiful harvest, a fear of uncertainty existed. This uncertainty existed parallel to a faith in rituals and a belief in a certain closeness to nature and environment. Uncertainty linked to disease, death, and in turn, the harvest, were seen connected with the cosmic order, 'which could be controlled or appeased because of the closeness of humans and nature'.[431] This had two major implications. First, it meant that the lower castes were allowed a 'certainty' about the world since they were close to nature. Second, it meant that the upper castes feared the closeness to nature by lower castes, for the closeness suggested that lower castes might have more control than apparent. This closeness to nature was reflected in Theyyam performances which took

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[429] Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam', 191-192.
[430] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author.
[431] Menon, 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam', 193.

place in shrines that were part of the natural landscape in Kerala. Though upper castes were 'afraid' of the lower castes and their relationship to nature, and its resulting performance in Theyyam, they still enjoyed a control and power that enabled landlords to treat their labourers as beasts of burden in the field.

In constituting a likeness between his own Dalit body performing and his ancestors' bodies as beasts of burden in the field, Mani attempts to bring together the Dalit body and cow productively as a means of understanding the issues pertaining to labour and caste in Kerala. It is interesting that he uses the cow to symbolise this likeness, as the beasts that he references would have possibly been buffaloes, or oxen, animals commonly used to plough fields. The question one might ask then is why he has likened his ancestors to cows and not these other animals. The cow-as-image is mostly linked to upper caste Hinduism; is there a link between the cow, caste and labour? In using the cow-as-image in his performance, Mani highlights that caste as the cow is at the root of the issues of labour. Bringing together an animality of the cow in terms of likeness, and also using the cow as representative of caste, Mani merges the cow-as-image and cow-as-animal and performs as both together. Here, we see a merging of social hierarchies and aesthetic ecologies in performance to highlight caste and labour issues in the twenty-first century.

Mani's comparison of his ancestors' bodies to that of cows is also interesting in the context of race studies. In the Introduction, I discussed Benedicte Boisseron's call for a mutualisation of understanding on race and animal studies, where race is not used as a means to further the cause of animal welfare. Instead Boisseron, and others like Gossett, suggest that race and animal studies must come together where the animal is not compared to the Black person as *likeness,* but instead a mutual form of abolition of both systems of oppression should

take place.[432] Since Mani compares his ancestors' bodies to that of 'beasts of burden' in the field, he constitutes a *likeness* between Dalit body and a cow. In his performance, he imitates movements of the cow and likens these movements to his ancestors moving with the heaviness constituted through the burden of labour, both physically and emotionally. As I showed in the description, Mani even injured himself in his performance, reflecting this burden of labour. His aim in this performance is to highlight caste and not issues of animal welfare, but in bringing together labour and caste through likeness, Mani shows that the cow, in particular, is a powerful and rich image with which to consider issues of oppression.

In light of the cow-as-image being used to highlight caste and labour links in Kerala, the shape of the red helmet in *#MakeInIndia* is significant. As mentioned earlier, the shape of the helmet resembles the Punnapra-Vayalar memorial (see Fig.3.8)*,* constructed in honour of the 1946 Communist insurgency in Travancore, Kerala. The Punnapra-Vayalar uprising was possibly one of the major instances of an armed uprising of the working class against a government in India. According to the Communist party in Kerala, this uprising was a chapter in the freedom struggle of Travancore, where the Travancore ruling government attempted to disregard workers in the area. In protest, the workers came together against the government, and ensured that an independent Travancore state could not emerge. Another version of this uprising suggests that the Communist party members used labourers to 'prove the vitality' of their party.[433] A third version, possibly the most accurate according to Robin Jeffrey, indicates that the Communist Party Centre Committee planned this insurgency as the first of many such insurgencies in India; in essence, they were planning an uprising so that the power of the state could be transferred to the people.[434] Even though these suggestions imply varying causes for

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[432] Boisseron, 'Afro-Dog' and Gossett, 'Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign'.
[433] Robin Jeffrey, 'India's Working Class Revolt: Punnapra-Vayalar and the Communist "Conspiracy" of 1946', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 18, no. 2 (April 1981): 98, https://doi.org/10.1177/001946468101800201.
[434] Jeffrey, 'India's Working Class Revolt', 99.

the uprising, it is clear that several workers lost their lives as a result of an armed resistance against the government.[435] The red helmet, in its colour, shape, and form, is given a voice in Mani's work as an aesthetic of Communist political agendas, and as a developed form inspired by his childhood trips to the Memorial. This is in line with the movement of aesthetic tropes of the left as travelling 'through public and popular culture in a lasting way'.[436] Using the shape of the Memorial in his performance, Mani traces an event that took place pre-Independence, and brings it to a present day audience as a form, showing that these events are '*forms,* rather than genres or slogans' and that they are part of a field of artistic practice and historic connection.[437] Mani's use of a memorial dedicated to these workers is a reflection of his alignment with the injustice faced by labourers. The shape and the redness of the helmet show Mani's position with respect to the workers—that he stood with them and demanded their justice as the 'real' labourers of India (as opposed to Modi's Make in India campaign) is the clear message of the performance.[438]

Addressing what Mani calls the 'masculine and patriarchal' state that is India through a performance invoking the cow is important.[439] As shown in Chapter One, India as a nation is considered female and the cow itself as Kamadhenu and Gaumata has been seen in several calendar art images from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as representative of the Indian subcontinent. The symbolism evoked through the cow as a mother reflects an emotional appeal of nationalism. The cow, considered a mother to all Hindus as well as a mother of a Hindu identity and nationality, is called forth as a symbol to charm men into

[435] Ayyappan, 'BJP Revives Debate: People Killed in Punnapra-Vayalar Martyrs or Communist Pawns?', *OnManorama*, 5 November 2022, https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2022/11/05/ps-sreedharan-pillai-book-punnapra-vayalar-uprisings-cpi-cpm.html.

[436] Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason, eds., 'Introduction', in *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia: Aesthetics, Networks and Connected Histories* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 5, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350187474.

[437] Hoek and Sunderason, 'Introduction', 25.

[438] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author.

[439] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author.

protecting the nation for they are in turn protecting their mothers. They are also convinced into thinking that the cow is linked with the idea of building a strong nation as opposed to a weak nation—the strength of men comes from the milk and *ghee* of the cow; if there are fewer cows, men will grow weak from the lack of this dairy nutrition.[440] This gendered notion of the cow as a symbol of a female Hindu *rashtra* (Hindu country) that requires protection is in contrast to Mani's vision of India as 'masculine and patriarchal'. The notions of patriarchy and masculinity are in relation to the labour he is portraying. Even though the tharavadu in Kerala was a matrilineal system of inheritance, the power of the landlord lay with the man of the house. Since the power was associated with male authority, it reflected a patriarchal matrilineal system, which Mani's performance brings to light.

Moreover, the embodiment of the cow (which is female) through Mani's male body is interesting as it complicates the nature of his performance. Mani's questioning of the gendered trope of the nation dovetails with the nature of production in India and recalls his evocation about *who* the real labourers of India are. His body performs as labourer and cow, mirroring his claim to his body being 'not really a human body…but it was like the body of a cow'.[441] How do we then approach a gendered notion of the Indian state through a performance that questions labour, but embodies the very ideas that comprise the very gendering of India as a country? The protection of India was a protection of the cow, and this act of protecting was against Dalits like Sajan Mani. The discrimination faced by his ancestors in terms of being treated as beasts of burden but also in terms of them not having access to rights that other upper caste Indian citizens enjoyed should be read in parallel with Mani's performance as labourer and cow in contemporary India. Despite it being a male body performing, the ideas that are put forth about labour and nationhood should be read in their entirety.

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[440] See Chapter One in this thesis as well as Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India', 4291–99.
[441] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author.

Here, the idea of cow-as-image, standing for the Indian nation remains important to contextualise. This also mirrors the ideas of protected ignorance for the understanding of India as a nation is mostly seen through an upper caste lens. Mani's performance questions this normativity of upper castes and puts the idea of nation and production at the forefront. The contrast between Mani's performance as questioning the idea of nationhood and labour production, and the embodiment of cow as nation put forth by calendar art, come together to convey an extremely strong performative indication of the Indian nation today.

Art will never die, but COW?

As I described in this chapter's introduction, Mani used the concept of the cow in three of his performances. The first one was about food and caste, the second about labour and caste, and finally, Mani interrogated the gallery space and commercial art market of India. The irony of this performance, *Art will never die, but COW?* was that it was enacted in the India Art Fair, an annual gathering of commercial galleries. This performance was adapted into a video installation that was part of the show *Earth 200CE* in Sydney.

Art will never die, but COW? brings out some salient features related to the cow in India. The first is the notion of the cow in private and public space and the second is the cow-as-image (also discussed in Chapter One). This section of the chapter will focus on discussing these aspects briefly, to highlight Mani's message of the dismissal of caste from the Indian art sector.

As a sceptic of the commercial gallery sector in India, Mani was extremely aware of the notion of public and private space when conceptualising this work. His firm belief was that his art required to be democratic, and performed in a space that was accessible to all. Therefore, he started his performance in the streets of New Delhi in 2019, so that people who could not attend the India Art Fair would still view his work. While his imitation of a cow on the streets

of New Delhi is indeed an interesting phenomenon, the divisions between the privileged private space of the IAF and the public open space of the streets is evident in Mani's interaction with security guards at the entrance to the IAF.[442] These guards form the barrier between public and private space. When Mani approached the entrance, continuing to be in his embodiment of a cow, the guards did not allow him to enter the space. Since Mani also had cow dung, the whole affair was even more complicated. The guard's reaction to 'Sajan Mani as cow' entering the IAF is worth examining. First, the guards viewed 'Sajan Mani as cow' as a human being performing as an animal. Second, in viewing Mani as a human first over an animal, the idea that Mani's cow would always be perceived with an anthropocentric bias became clear. Finally, the guards' reaction to a human-cow hybrid reflects a reluctance in allowing the 'animality' into a space like the IAF, showing that the cow, even though revered as Kamadhenu and Gaumata in India, is not usually allowed entry to private art spaces. Additionally, the guards might have been uncomfortable with Mani's clear disruption of the cow as a religious image.

Going back to the idea of imitation, Mani once again actively performs as the cow, but also ensures that it is a cow *image* that is entering the space and not the cow as an animal. Mani's 'representation of Brahmanic modernity of Indian visual art' was through his donning of the cow headgear and wearing of the tail. According to him, the headgear of the cow symbolises upper caste 'Brahmanic knowledge production'.[443] The head of a cow symbolising upper caste knowledge production reflects the structure of castes as a 'moment of creation of the universe, by and out of a sacrifice of the body of purusha, the primeval man'.[444] The Purushasukta, the tenth book of the Rig Veda, speaks of the universe being created from the body of *purusha* or the primordial/ primeval man. As I discussed in the Introduction, the four

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[442] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, August 24, 2021, transcript with author.
[443] Sajan Mani, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.
[444] Mukul Sharma, 'The Killing of Maya in a Lake: Caste, Nature and Culture', *The MARG Foundation* 71, no. 3 (March 2020): 29.

varnas in society were born out of the *purusha's* body: the Brahmins (priests) from the head, the Kshatriyas (warriors) from the arms, the Vaishyas (peasants) from the thighs and the Shudras (servants) from the feet. The specific parts of the body reflect the hierarchy in these structures with the Brahmins (the head) being the top and the Shudras (the feet) right at the bottom.[445] This excludes many others who are not part of these four *varnas* including the Dalits, the Adivasis and other tribes. Therefore, Mani's symbolic invocation of the cow *head* as Brahmanic knowledge production stems from this idea of the Rig Veda. Additionally, in animal hierarchies in the Vedas, cows are considered Brahmins.[446] Mani's use of cow headgear draws from these traditions but uses their traditional nature to disrupt their associations. He uses the symbolic trope of the cow to question the nature of its meaning in the commercial art space of India.

A second iteration of this work was recently displayed in Sydney as a video installation, part of the show *Earth 200CE*. Here, Mani is seen donning a similar cow headgear and moving up and down in a way that resembles squats. Once again, the notion of Brahmanic knowledge production is symbolically expounded through the cow headgear, where the knowledge here is a burden—the heaviness of the mask mirrors the heaviness of the knowledge and thereby the difficulty in performing the squatting motion. However, the cow in this iteration is purely as image. In the performance at IAF, Mani embodied the cow in his movements, walking on four legs and wearing a tail. Here he remains obviously human, only invoking a cow animality on his head. This becomes an interesting parallel to the prayer ritual performed in front of Lord Ganesha. Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, is prayed to with people holding their ears and squatting before him. He is the only god in India to be prayed to in this manner. It is then

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[445] Sharma, 'The Killing of Maya in a Lake: Caste, Nature and Culture'.
[446] Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, 658.

curious to see Mani as a man with the head of a cow—in some ways, a hybrid—performing this prayer movement.[447]

The associations of animality and religiosity are clear in Mani's invocation of the cow to symbolise an upper caste knowledge. These associations clearly stem from texts like the Vedas that are upper caste. The understanding of animality in association with religion is clearly seen as viewed with a lens of protected ignorance in Mani's work. Mani's use of symbolic tropes of upper caste Hinduism to disrupt the very nature of these tropes shows a resistance of caste, but also shows a resistance to the normative understanding that pervades India which is upper caste. This was also reflected in the food practices of beef eating, where beef eating is shunned because the normative upper caste view of eating does not approve of beef. Mani's choice to don cow headgear as opposed to any other animal as a framing of Brahmanic knowledge production is an indication of the power the cow holds in India. This decision also reinforces the cow-as-image in the way it is perceived.

The cow-as-image and its perception is reflected as an immortality in Mani's rhetorical title *Art will never die, but COW?*. If 'the art' in the title is the cow-as-image, then it is implied that the image is immortalised, but the cow-as-animal eventually dies. Moreover, 'the art' in the title is also representative of an exclusive upper caste art space, symbolised by the cow. Whether this space will change and become inclusive remains in question.

A reflection on art spaces is seen in other Indian performative art like the *Memory Drawing* series (2007-2009) by Nikhil Chopra. Here, Chopra embodies the persona of Yog Raj Chitrakar and enters different art spaces as patron and painter. A similarity to Mani's performance is visible in the question: 'what does it mean to make art and be an artist in India and the world?'[448] In his performance, Mani too asks a similar question of the art world in

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[447] A discussion on hybridity and gods is part of Chapter Four on Siddhesh Gautam.
[448] Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 6-9.

India, and appears to be asking: what does it mean to make art and be an artist in a predominantly upper caste Indian art space? Mani's call for more inclusivity reflects the lack of scholarship and exploration of art and caste in Indian art history and art practice. As I showed in the Introduction, a preoccupation with the idea of an 'Indian' identity did not often extend to an idea of a Dalit identity. These preoccupations were largely a response to colonial rule and ideologies. Unfortunately, in this preoccupation, a certain invisibility of caste pervaded the Indian art space, and as shown in Mani's work, continues to permeate the gallery sector in India. Though new exhibitions that focus on art and caste are on the rise, the larger viewership of art is restricted to upper caste people whose perceived knowledge is often dominated by protected ignorance.

If viewership dismantled this ignorance of upper castes, and demolished the social hierarchies of the caste system, Mani's call for more inclusivity could be achieved. A significant part of this dismantling would be to perceive the cow-as-animal rather than as image. Since hierarchies of caste exist in the name of the cow-as-image, abolishing this image and understanding the animality of the cow would mean that atrocities and hierarchy could be removed.

Conclusion

In writing about an approach to reading Sajan Mani's performances, the ephemerality of his performances has to be acknowledged. It is difficult to write about the visuality and experience of a performance that I have not viewed in real time. I have relied greatly on Mani's lived experiences as a performer and the insight gained from interviewing him, as well as the photographic stills and video clips I have been able to access. Here I would like to stress the importance of the story Mani tells through his performance, which then lives beyond the temporality and ephemerality of the performative act. But Mani's story is available to only

those that ask—perhaps the ephemerality of the original performance ensures a 'safety' since these performances are to be experienced in the moment.

Mani's three performances have provided a framework with which to discuss issues surrounding the cow. The performances have served as a crossroads between caste, animality and overall methodology, and shown that the cow offers a visual language with which to represent the above perspectives. The uniqueness of this visual language in Mani's work comes through an analysis of his lived experiences that have served as the basis for my analyses. In turn, the reciprocity and relatedness of the cow and human is seen through these lived experiences and indicates an idea of 'ecology' that is distinctive to Mani's visual vocabulary. This idea of ecology is defined through Mani's performances as an animality of the cow or an aesthetic ecology of the cow. His work, through a relatedness and reciprocity that is the foundational relationship for himself and his understanding of the cow, indicates that the cow is more than just its divine self as image. In this understanding of the cow as more than divine, viewers are led to explore relations to the other issues that surround the cow—*Beef Project* shows us the problematics of meat-eating and the conversations surrounding beef in India and its complications with caste, *#MakeInIndia* expresses the challenges that come with labour and labour production in India, and *Art will never die, but COW?* articulates the apolitical nature of the Indian gallery world and the dominance of Brahmanic knowledge production.

The protected ignorance that underlies the cow is then confronted; it is through this notion that the cow is still largely understood only as image. Mani dismantles this protected ignorance of the social hierarchies of caste and presents the merging of cow-as-image and cow-as-animal in his performative pieces. Mani's embodiment of the cow presents a new conjuncture as a site to frame issues of caste, reinforcing this bringing together of cow-as-image and cow-as-animal. Through the three performances, I have shown that Mani's work highlights the cow as a unique mode of visuality in terms of discussion of the issues associated

with it. It is only through the cow, as animal, divine, mother, and image, that these discussions can be thought through; no other animal in India would have the same bearing.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE DIGITAL COW: SIDDHESH GAUTAM

In the future we might all be vegetarian,

and this life will seem barbaric the way

a corset was or eugenics. We might look

at this man being secretly recorded, bragging,

They killed cows, I killed them,..

('They Killed Cows, I Killed Them' by Tishani Doshi) [449]

The flogging at Una, Gujarat, in 2016, served as the inspiration for the images *Cow Raj* (2020) (see Fig.4.1) and *Gauraksha* (2021) (see Fig.4.2) by artist Siddhesh Gautam (b.1991). As detailed in Chapter One, in the Una incident, seven Dalit men were tied to the back of a truck and publicly flogged by Hindu fundamentalists on account of having allegedly killed a cow. However, the men were in fact skinning an already dead cow as part of their profession in the leather trade. The flogging was recorded and widely circulated on social media platforms, especially WhatsApp. The incident at Una is one among several examples of flogging and lynching that have taken place across India over several years in the name of the cow. [450] These incidents occur predominantly in North India in what is called the 'Cow Belt', and marginalised communities like Muslims and the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi (DBA) community are the victims of such attacks. Both *Cow Raj* and *Gauraksha* draw from the Una incident and are also representative of other similar incidents of violence that have taken place. These images were first uploaded to Gautam's Instagram page @bakeryprasad, which serves as his main platform to share his artwork.

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[449] See Tishani Doshi, *A God at the Door* (Noida, India: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2021), 45. These are the first few lines of Tishani Doshi's poem on lynching incidents in India in the name of the cow.

[450] The Una incident has been referred to in detail in Chapter One. The Una incident was a flogging incident. Other violence related to the cow has included instances of lynching.

Before looking at the wider issues, some description and analysis of the individual artworks will be offered. There are several compositional elements in *Cow Raj* and *Gauraksha* that are worth noting, in terms of style and symbolism. In *Cow Raj*, the eye is immediately drawn to the figure in front that is a half-animal, half-human figure, that gazes outward at the viewer. The figure's head resembles a brown coloured cow with horns. The brown head sits on a human body that is dressed in a saffron and white *kurta pyjama* (a tunic and pant combination), a black Nehru jacket (a short coat with a vertical collar, often worn by men from South Asia), and black shoes. The figure wears what appears to be a modern smart watch, while a pen protrudes from the Nehru jacket pocket. Behind this half-cow, half-human figure, are several bodies all lying at different angles. The bodies are clothed in dark green, blue, and white, and lie face down or with most of their faces hidden. A lone figure clad in white is seen lying on its side at the far end of the image, very near what appears to be a horizon line. Behind the horizon line, a *Dhamma Chakra* (also commonly called the *Ashoka Chakra* or 'the wheel of law') rises like a half sun against a dark blue sky.

In *Gauraksha*, two skeletons sit side by side in an environment that has both natural and industrial components. One of the skeletons resembles a human-like figure, while the other seems to be the skeleton of a cow. The first human-like skeleton sits with arms tied behind its back, wearing a light sky-blue shirt and brown pants. The shirt is slightly open at the chest, revealing a bone structure that holds up a tilted skull. The tilted skull reveals no specific features that could attribute it to a particular personality, except that its features are human. In front of the human skeleton lies a cow skeleton, coloured in brown with bones prominent in white. The head of the cow is separated from the rest of the body, almost as though the creature has been decapitated. A river lined with trees runs behind the skeletons in the foreground. Behind the line of trees looms an unfinished construction site. The lower-left corner of the

frame of the image, next to the decapitated cow head, shows an upturned red book on its spine which reads *Salaam* or *Salute* by Omprakash Valmiki in *Devnagari* script.

The rising sun *Dhamma Chakra* has many symbolic associations and is most directly linked to Buddhism and Emperor Ashoka. Emperor Ashoka famously adopted the *chakra* as a symbol of peace as well as of Buddhism.[451] Gautam's inclusion of the *chakra* in *Cow Raj* is also a reference and homage to the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi (DBA) community, many of whom are Buddhists. The *chakra* is also the central element on the Indian national flag today. As the central element of the Indian flag, the *chakra* represents values that Indians should hold true in their daily lives. The breaking of the spokes of the *chakra,* though not represented in the image, signifies the failure of humankind to uphold these values and abide by the Constitution of India, as well as a collapse of the twenty-four laws or *dhammas* that are meant to underlie human philosophy: 'the more we kill, the more we break these spokes'.[452]

Gautam's colour palette as well as his general style is drawn from a very personal narrative that has influenced him as an artist. In his interview with me, Gautam related the story of his great-grandfather who renounced the world to become a monk. Since his grandfather grew up without the physical presence of a father, he imagined his relationship to his father (Gautam's great-grandfather) and commissioned paintings of this imagined relationship. For this endeavour, he employed billboard painters, and requested that they recreate these imagined 'surreal' scenes. Gautam, having grown up surrounded by these images, has been influenced by their colour tones, especially the use of brown and blue.[453]

In addition to being influenced by his family history, Gautam's choice of colours in both works also indicates a certain ascription of colours to symbolic counterparts. For instance,

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[451] Charles Allen, *Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor* (Hachette UK, 2012), 355-356.
[452] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.
[453] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.

Gautam's use of saffron (the *kurta pyjama*) in *Cow Raj* signals the association of saffron to the Hindu right, though traditionally, saffron was worn by monks of both Buddhist and Hindu orders. In his interview, Gautam substantiated his use of saffron to be suggestive of a Hindu position, especially a Hinduism associated with right-wing India.[454] Gautam's conscious colour selection is also seen in his decision to use light blue to clothe workers from the Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi community, seen in the figures sprawled on the ground in *Cow Raj* and the single skeletal figure in *Gauraksha.* The dark blue that makes up the background behind the *Dhamma Chakra* in *Cow Raj* similarly suggests an affiliation to Dalit resistance.[455] The dark blue is also commonly seen in the depiction of suits worn by Ambedkar.[456] Overall, Gautam's colour palette is distinctive and adds to the recognition of his work and style. Particularly since his work is most visible on digital platforms like Instagram, his selection of certain colours aids in the identification of his work when circulated on social media.

This chapter argues that Siddhesh Gautam's images highlight the politics of the cow in relation to caste and ecology by mobilising the cow's iconography in a digital space that reaches a wide audience. Gautam satirises the iconography of the cow or the cow-as-image to disrupt hegemonic acts of violence that take place against Dalits in the name of the cow. He also uses satire to demonstrate that the cow-as-animal faces direct harm due to human industrialisation. I speculate that Gautam's images require to be understood in terms of the contexts they portray—caste violence, the relatedness of cow and human, and the voice of the artist—as well as their aesthetic and stylistic value. Such an approach to reading images is an effective way of analysing the scope of Gautam's work which looks at issues for Dalits in the name of the cow, and issues for the cow in the name of human capitalism. Gautam's *Cow Raj*

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[454] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.
[455] Shraddha Nair, 'Art & Voices Matter: Bakeryprasad a.k.a. Siddhesh Gautam on the Dalit Movement', *STIR World*, 17 May 2021, https://www.stirworld.com/see-features-art-voices-matter-bakeryprasad-a-k-a-siddhesh-gautam-on-the-dalit-movement.
[456] Tartakov, 'Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery', 20.

and *Gauraksha* position the interests of Dalits (casteised groups) as being targeted because of their relationship to the cow and highlight the persecution faced by Dalit groups due to their association with the cow as consumers of beef and leather tanners. As we will see later in the chapter, Gautam's *'King' makers* underlines the suffering of the cow at the hands of industry.

The chapter first comments on the role of Instagram and its impact on Siddhesh Gautam's digital practice. Second, the chapter traces a brief history of political cartoons globally and in India, outlining some examples that resemble Gautam's style. Third, the visual impact of *Cow Raj* and *Gauraksha* are explored, alongside the message these works convey. This exploration leads to a detailed examination of both the role of hybrids and masks in *Cow Raj*. Last, the chapter looks at another of Gautam's images titled *'King' makers* and considers the impact of industrialisation on the cow from an ecological standpoint. The chapter argues that Gautam disrupts the cow's hegemonic caste associations, as well as highlights the suffering of the cow due to industrialisation, on a digital platform.

The Role of Instagram in Evolving a Digital Presence

The landscape of digital art and media in India is populated by a number of artists who tackle a range of issues including those concerning society, ecology and the cow. This chapter focuses on the work of one such digital artist, Siddhesh Gautam, who currently lives in New Delhi, India, but is originally from Nagina, a small town in Uttarakhand, India. Gautam's digital presence is primarily on Instagram where he has over 60,000 followers. He regularly posts his digital art under the handle @bakeryprasad. The name 'Bakery Prasad' refers to Gautam's enjoyment of baking, and the word *prasad* denotes food offerings to the divine that are subsequently shared with worshippers of that divine in India.[457] Gautam's page does precisely this—'bakes' several digital art pieces and shares them as a secular form of *prasad* with his

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[457] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.

followers. Even though @bakeryprasad and Siddhesh Gautam are one and the same, Gautam indicated that he sees his digital identity as slightly separate from his persona.[458] His digital identity as @bakeryprasad is tangential to the discussion in this chapter. For the course of this chapter, I refer to the artist by his given name Siddhesh Gautam, even though the images analysed in this chapter were posted on his Instagram page under the handle @bakeryprasad.

While Gautam's official training is in design, his digital presence on Instagram reveals an art practice that extends beyond what he terms 'social design'. Gautam's form of social design is largely in the sense of highlighting and being inspired by 'social' issues.[459] This aligns with most definitions of social design which affirm that it is good design for society at large, while also describing it as either solving problems at a micro-level or as design addressing situations like poverty or illness.[460] The definitions of social design are useful to the understanding of the three works by Gautam in this chapter. Rather than treat his works as designs that perform a social function, I look at them as visual artefacts in the digital field. Gautam is certainly inspired by social events in relation to the 'issues of marginalised communities' that take centre stage in the three images discussed in this chapter.[461] For instance, two of the images discussed in this chapter were inspired by episodes of violence that took place against Dalits and Muslims who were allegedly involved in either transporting the cow or killing the cow for meat and leather.

As a platform and digital application, Instagram was originally meant for instant and quick sharing of images, mostly photographs. It has now extended its reach to include videos, reels, memes, and artworks, to name a few. Artists now upload images of their artworks on to

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[458] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.

[459] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.

[460] Nynke Tromp and Stéphane Vial, 'Five Components of Social Design: A Unified Framework to Support Research and Practice', *The Design Journal*, 27 June 2022, 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2022.2088098.

[461] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.

the platform for visibility, maintaining an online portfolio and ease in interaction with their followers. Social media, like Instagram, can be understood in terms of vision itself: the way in which we see is positioned both historically and socially as a 'desire for life in its documented form'.[462] Artwork like Gautam's that is posted to Instagram can be viewed as sometimes recording life as his images are often drawn from incidents that have taken place across India and are inspired by social issues. In recording images on his page, Gautam creates a repository of current social issues and events as 'life in its documented form'. His large following on Instagram helps disseminate messages through his art across digital and social platforms.

Digital platforms like Instagram have allowed for new connections to the idea of 'everyday', making quotidian tasks like drinking coffee and waiting for a train part of a collection of moments that are seen and discussed on a public platform.[463] This is part of a long trend of similar social media platforms like Flickr which also privileged the idea of the 'everyday' aesthetic as well as the immediacy of the image.[464] Often, the inspirations for images like Gautam's are also found on social media channels. For example, Gautam's work was inspired by the incident at Una, Gujarat, and also other similar incidents of both flogging and lynching that have taken place across India on account of Dalit and Muslim involvement in allegedly transporting or killing a cow. Several of these lynchings and floggings were recorded and circulated on social media (largely WhatsApp). By drawing inspiration from events that have taken place in India and have also found a digital space in terms of circulation, Gautam's works themselves, a result of this inspiration and circulation, become part of

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[462] Nathan Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media* (Verso, 2019), 7.

[463] Giulia Battaglia and Paolo Favero, 'Reflections upon the Meaning of Contemporary Digital Image-Making Practices in India,' in *Arts and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Parul Dave Mukherji, ASA Monographs (London New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 241–58.

[464] See Susan Murray, 'Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics,' *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (August 1, 2008): 147–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412908091935 for a detailed analysis of the 'everyday' on Flickr. Today, Flickr seems a platform of the past, but its relevance in encouraging the immediacy of images is noteworthy and parallels of this immediacy can be drawn with Instagram.

everyday narrative. By becoming part of the everyday, the works also resort to a sort of 'entertaining politics'[465], reflecting Aswin Punathambekar's assertion that to pose a question like 'how do people *entertain* political matters?' (emphasis added) is to 'wonder how talk about political matters gets woven into the rhythms of everyday mediatized lives'.[466] Even though Gautam's images might be consumed rapidly and replaced with other visuals uploaded with the immediacy of a platform like Instagram, the image's presence on Instagram signals that responses to violent incidents like lynching have become part of the 'everyday', thus showing that these acts could almost be considered part of 'normal' life in India. Additionally, political matters then become part of a visual 'entertaining politics' on social media like Instagram, since these platforms are used to 'entertain' their consumers. At the same time, platforms like Instagram which host visuals like Gautam's also 'invite us…to leave the frame and engage with the social and political nature of everyday life',[467] a certain form of 'relational aesthetics' as coined by Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998.[468] In Gautam's case, 'relational aesthetics' refers to the rootedness of his work in social contexts and the resulting invitation to engage with these social contexts when viewing and interacting with the work. Therefore, 'contemporary digital image-making practices facilitate the creation of new forms of collaboration, participation and political action.'[469]

Moreover, a parallel is seen in the circulation of images that document lynching and flogging: on the one hand, the actual incident, and on the other, Gautam's documentation and interpretation of the incident. Gautam's response in the form of his artwork *Cow Raj* (2020)

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[465] See Aswin Punathambekar, 'Satire, Elections, and Democratic Politics in Digital India,' *Television & New Media* 16, no. 4 (May 1, 2015): 397-398, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415573953. 'Entertaining politics', as described by Punathambekar, speaks of a range of possibilities in terms of 'entertaining' including to occupy, to be engrossed, to pay attention to, and to contemplate, which all serve as useful frameworks.

[466] Aswin Punathambekar, 'Satire, Elections, and Democratic Politics in Digital India', 397.

[467] Battaglia and Paolo Favero, 'Reflections upon the Meaning of Contemporary Digital Image-Making Practices in India', 247.

[468] Relational aesthetics has a much longer history that I will not discuss here.

[469] Battaglia and Paolo Favero, 'Reflections upon the Meaning of Contemporary Digital Image-Making Practices in India', 242.

was posted to his Instagram account four years after the original incident at Una in 2016. In social media terms, four years is a considerable amount of time and does not address the immediacy that platforms like Instagram otherwise carry. Despite this gap in time, Gautam's decision to upload an artwork as a response to an incident of the past illustrates the continuing relevance of the issue surrounding the cow and characterises the socio-political reality of contemporary India. His decision to respond to the flogging at Una also underlines that the contemporaneity of the social issue supersedes the instant and quick nature of a social media platform like Instagram. This gap of four years can be situated in Paolo Favero's idea of 'present images'. Favero discusses the 'present as a point of suture between the past and the future, allowing us also to grasp those ever-present ways of engaging with images that have been marginalized by hegemonic practices'.[470] Gautam's *Cow Raj* is still part of an oeuvre of 'present images'; his work holds value as the very nature of an incident like flogging continues to be relevant today.[471]

Instagram has changed audience interaction entirely by making images appear on a feed based on algorithms akin to viewer likes and dislikes.[472] Additionally, an awareness of how audiences will read shared images is part of this entire process of interaction.[473] Inarguably, public consumption of images on Instagram helps carry the idea of the cow as symbol (whether divine or otherwise) effectively, thereby giving the cow an inescapable identity in the mind of the human. The discussion on circulation and the above mentioned 'present images' can also be extended to the afterlives of such images—what happens to these images once they are

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[470] Paolo S. H. Favero, 'Introduction: Present Images,' in *The Present Image: Visible Stories in a Digital Habitat*, ed. Paolo S. H. Favero (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 10, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69499-3_1.

[471] See Favero, 'Introduction' for a more detailed discussion on what he means by 'present' images. By calling them 'present' images, he dissociates them from automatically being associated with the digital as terms like 'new images' are. He also grounds these 'present images' in that they speak about this particular moment of time where there is a dialectic between the analogue and the digital.

[472] See Lachlan MacDowall and Kylie Budge, *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001799, for more on audiences of Instagram, especially Chapter Five.

[473] Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media*.

shared? Are they further circulated in a network, to emerge yet again, either in their original form, or as a modified image (like a meme or edited image)? Though Instagram serves to initially circulate these images of the cow and construct in the mind of the public an almost indelible idea of the cow, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the extent to which circulation aids in establishing the cow as a larger image of multiple ideologies through this further sharing.[474] However, to look at Gautam's work solely as a digital illustration is to apply a 'critical logic from art history discourse that views images as formally artistic and documentary objects'.[475] Therefore, 'in order to understand digital images today, we need to move beyond a narrow definition of the field of vision and look instead at images as relational items situated amidst the events, socialness and physicality of actors' everyday lives'.[476] This resonates with my approach to reading Gautam's images as embedded in caste, relatedness, the digital sphere, and cow politics.

The 'cow image', partly through its dissemination, therefore, remains a human construct, one fraught with contrary positions that both exploit and revere the cow-as-image, but not as an animal. Gautam's work also helps promote this widespread circulation of the cow image; the impact of his images is extensive because of their presence on a platform like Instagram. The response to the Una incident, for instance, increases engagement with the incident, because it allows for knowledge of the occurrence to spread beyond the local (in this case, Gujarat), and reach a wider audience around India, and even the globe.

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[474] See Rahul Mukherjee, 'Mobile Witnessing on WhatsApp: Vigilante Virality and the Anatomy of Mob Lynching', *South Asian Popular Culture* 18, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 79–101, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2020.1736810 for a discussion on the circulation of images on WhatsApp to incite violence against Dalits and Muslims by *gau rakshak* groups.
[475] Jurgenson, *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media*, 12.
[476] Paolo Favero, 'Getting Our Hands Dirty (Again): Interactive Documentaries and the Meaning of Images in the Digital Age,' *Journal of Material Culture* 18, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 261, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183513492079.

Notes on Political Cartoons and their Influence on Style

Gautam's images can be broadly categorised as graphic forms that use a cartoon-like style. It is important to note here that Gautam himself did not categorise his style of work. In terming his work cartoon-like, I am not attempting to say that his work *is* a cartoon, but instead hoping to show that the style and function of cartoons and their history are a relevant context for his images. This section looks at the history of cartoons and their styles to situate Gautam's images.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a cartoon as a 'a full-page illustration in a paper or periodical; *esp.* applied to those in the comic papers relating to current events. Now, a humorous or topical drawing (of any size) in a newspaper, etc.'[477] Another exploration of the term by Thomas Milton Kemnitz specifies that 'cartoon' is vague and can be applied to numerous graphic forms. Kemnitz goes on to describe that cartoons can be divided into two primary categories: ones that portray opinions and ones that subscribe to humour (though cartoons of opinion might use humour as a tool to deploy certain messages).[478] For this chapter, the images discussed will be taken to function as political cartoons, even though they are not necessarily 'humorous' as per the Oxford Dictionary's definition. Gautam's images mirror Kemnitz's definition of a cartoon, especially his definition that a cartoon portrays opinions (whether humorous or otherwise). Gautam's graphic form is then a cartoon in the broadest sense, and a cartoon that is currently in the digital mediascape (especially Instagram) rather than being in print media like newspapers and magazines. In particular, Gautam's cartoons seem to belong in the field of political cartoons, since they comment on the current state and

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[477] Oxford English Dictionary, 'Cartoon, n.' (Oxford University Press, July 2023), Oxford English Dictionary, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5378725295.

[478] Thomas Milton Kemnitz, 'The Cartoon as a Historical Source,' *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1 (1973): 81–93, https://doi.org/10.2307/202359.

impact of politics and political figures in India. Additionally, the style that Gautam employs in his work resembles the way in which cartoons are rendered.

As Kemnitz points out, 'political cartoons are specific: they depend on the viewer's recognition of the characters, subjects, and events depicted'.[479] He also stipulates that the imagery of the cartoon in terms of its symbols and implicit metaphors is crucial to its interpretation. In other words, for a full comprehension of a cartoon, it is essential that those viewing it fully understand the symbols and metaphors that go into the visual grammar of the cartoon as a whole graphic form. Kris and Gombrich show that symbols in cartoons often seem to gain their significance from double-meaning, as illustrated by the gradual transformation of a pear into King Louis-Philippe by the first French comic paper, *La Caricature*. The pear became, in that instance, a symbol of freedom in the French people's war due to its double meaning where *poire* in French also translated to *fat-head*, thus showing that a play on images became supplemented by a play on words. [480]

Still, cartoons are more controversial in nature than the written word, disclosing a certain power of the image over written commentary on political subjects. Victor Navasky describes this phenomenon by saying that 'any notion is palatable when rendered in prose. When the same notion is pictures, however, the record shows that Op-Ed editors see it as a far greater threat'.[481] While this is slightly exaggerated, it is cartoons in print media such as newspapers and magazines which usually undergo an editorial review and process. The same rules that apply to written articles in print media do not apply to visuals appearing in the same space. In Gautam's case, the idea of 'editing' (or in his case, curating) is especially noteworthy. Since the mode of circulation of his images is through Instagram and other social media, the

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[479] Kemnitz, 'The Cartoon as a Historical Source', 83.
[480] Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich, 'The Principles of Caricature1,' *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 17, no. 3–4 (1938): 337, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8341.1938.tb00301.x.
[481] Victor S. Navasky, *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013), 29-30.

'editing' of his work is different to the more traditional editorial reviews print media cartoonists go through. Gautam is free to curate his Instagram page without consulting a higher authority like an editor. Even though Instagram has famously censored a number of visuals for different reasons,[482] the three works of Gautam's in this chapter, though controversial for the political message they illustrate, have not been banned. Here, it is necessary to pause on the word 'illustrate'. As Navasky deliberates, the word 'illustration' is perhaps not the most appropriate: 'Images convey ideas on their own and don't merely "illustrate" words'.[483] Therefore, the word 'illustration' is perhaps inaccurate when describing images like Gautam's. Navasky also suggests that an 'image theory' can be applied when understanding political cartoons since they 'contain a condensed argument either along with the image or incarnated in it'.[484] He also proposes that the political cartoon is in itself an argument. If Siddhesh Gautam's work is then to be called a political cartoon, this would mean that his illustrations are in themselves an argument and are conveyed through Gautam's visual language. These cartoons do not 'illustrate' words or ideas but instead position themselves as opinions against the way in which the cow is currently perceived in India.

The history of Indian political cartoons is rooted in the colonial period. Shankar Pillai is perhaps the most famous political cartoonist for his use of satire; he worked in the *Hindustan Times* and 'helped elevate the profession of the cartoonist from being the creator of mere

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[482] See Al Jazeera Staff, 'Social Media Giants Accused of "Silencing" Kashmir Voices', *Al Jazeera*, 1 October 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/1/kashmir-report-accuses-us-social-media-giants-of-censorship. Social media platforms seem to censor individuals like journalists and artists from minority groups or those that speak about issues of a sensitive nature. For instance, Mir Suhail, a Kashmiri artist, found that his Instagram cartoons were constantly being removed on account of them containing hate speech and symbols despite that not being the case. Instead, the removal of such images was part of a larger censorship of ideas that did not align with current government rule.
Also see Payal Arora, 'Politics of Algorithms, Indian Citizenship, and the Colonial Legacy,' in *Ebook of Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia*, ed. Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan (University of Michigan Press, 2019), 37–52, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9561751. Arora includes examples of censorship from 2016, with eight instances in the digital sphere in just the first three months of the year. The text also speaks about how censorship laws stem from laws established under colonial rule in India.
[483] Navasky, *The Art of Controversy*, 75.
[484] Navasky, *The Art of Controversy*, 43.

decoration in a newspaper to being on a par status with the editorial commentator and political analyst'.[485] Similarly, R. K. Laxman, through his career as a political cartoonist over more than six decades, managed to convince the public 'to be perennially distrustful of authority'[486] through his cartoons and thus ensured that the political cartoon was one of 'several safeguards of democracy'.[487] These cartoons often used satire and caricature as visual modes of effective communication, and popularly depicted figures were Mahatma Gandhi and Indira Gandhi. B. R. Ambedkar also featured in numerous cartoons, though a recent survey of these cartoons by Unnamati Syama Sundar exposes the problems of political cartoons with respect to caste. Often, the cartoons of Shankar Pillai and R K Laxman highlighted the hostility and carelessness with which upper caste members of society view Dalits.[488]

Satire is repeatedly employed by political cartoonists to convey messages in a method that combines irony and humour. As Punathambekar notes in 2015, mainstream media like newspapers and magazines has seen a decline in trust in journalism due to journalism's reliance on corporate funding and backing.[489] This distrust still holds true today.[490] Therefore, satire seems to offer a new mode of engaging with the political. In Gautam's case, satire is offered through a visual mode that prioritises Gautam's own cartoon form and style. Using satire and his own set of symbols, Gautam's cartoon then becomes the argument that he expresses.

It is important here to underline that Gautam's work, though cartoon-like, is not caricature. Cartoons are often synonymised with caricature, though it is important to recognise

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[485] R. K. Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak,' *Daedalus* 118, no. 4 (1989): 76.
[486] E. P. Unny, 'The Indian Cartoon: An Overview,' in *The Indian Media: Illusion, Delusion, and Reality, Essays in Honour of Prem Bhatia* (Rupa and Co., 2006), 276–84.
[487] Laxman, 'Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak', 91.
[488] See Unnamati Syama Sundar, ed., *No Laughing Matter: The Ambedkar Cartoons, 1932-1956* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing Pvt Ltd, 14) for a full archival compilation and analysis of cartoons that depict Ambedkar.
[489] Punathambekar, 'Satire, Elections, and Democratic Politics in Digital India.'
[490] See "Adani Takes Control of NDTV, Buys Promoters' Stake At 17% Premium To Open Offer Price, Roys Resign," https://www.outlookindia.com/, December 31, 2022, https://www.outlookindia.com/business/adani-takes-control-of-ndtv-buys-promoters-stake-at-17-premium-to-open-offer-price-roys-resign-news-249687. Most recently, Gautam Adani, an Indian industrialist, took ownership of the Indian news channel NDTV.

that all cartoons are not caricatures. Kris and Gombrich define caricatures as a 'conscious distortion of the features of a person with the aim of ridicule'.[491] The aim of caricatures then appears to be to make fun of a person. In Gautam's images, few distortions appear that relate to particular individuals. Even though caricatures sometimes involve the transformation of a human head to an animal in terms of likeness of physiognomy,[492] Gautam's cow hybrid in *Cow Raj* does not caricature any politician or individual, but rather exists as a lone figure strengthened by the symbolism the cow holds. The use of symbolism and satire over caricature permeates Gautam's oeuvre.

Gautam's style is reminiscent of many cartoons, especially since he uses bold lines and solid colours. As a visual, this use of bold lines and solid colours bears resemblance to the ever-popular Tin-Tin by Hergé. The importance in drawing comparisons between Gautam's images and a classic like Tin-Tin is to show the powerful nature of the cartoon form. Often, cartoons are dismissed and not classified as 'art'. As Rodenbeck's analysis of Tin-Tin shows, cartoons are 'worthy of serious critical consideration not merely as an international phenomenon but also as works of art'.[493] Another 'international phenomenon' that uses a combination of animal and human cartoons is *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1980-1991) by Art Spiegelman. The graphic novel narrates the story of Spiegelman's father, a living Holocaust survivor and Polish Jew. *Maus* uses particular symbolic tropes and depicts Jews as mice, while non-Jewish Poles and Germans are depicted as cats and pigs. Spiegelman describes his mice as 'anthropomorphized' inspired by Jew-as-rat cartoons drawn for *Der Strumer,* a German tabloid newspaper.[494]

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[491] Kris and Gombrich, 'The Principles of Caricature1', 319-320.
[492] See Kris and Gombrich, 'The Principles of Caricature1', 334-336, for examples of this, especially the illustrations that accompany the writing of Giovanni Battista Porta.
[493] John Rodenbeck, 'The Tin-Tin Series: Children's Literature and Popular Appeal,' *Children's Literature* 1, no. 1 (1972): 93–97, https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.0.0439.
[494] Thomas Doherty, 'Art Spiegelman's Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust,' *American Literature* 68, no. 1 (1996): 74, https://doi.org/10.2307/2927540.

Gautam's cow figure resembles *Maus'* anthropomorphised mice in the way that the mice have significant mouse-like heads but otherwise human characteristics.

Other cartoon forms that are relatively similar to Gautam's are directly related to Indian cow politics. A graphic novel titled *Sacred Cow* (2017) by William de Tamaris and illustrated by George H. explores cow vigilantism and cow politics in India. The thirty-page book correlates the rise of violence against marginalised communities to the rise of the BJP and their devotion to the cow.[495] The difference in Tamaris' graphic form and Gautam's image is that Tamaris presents a narrative in motion, where violence takes place across several panels, while Gautam's image is a single panel that shows an aftermath of violence. A similar comment on cow politics can be found in an illustrated panel by Shrujana Niranjani Shridhar, a Dalit artist, for a series by media outlet *Firstpost* on cow politics and its history in coastal Karnataka.[496] Shridhar's image shows a crowd of white cows with *tilaks,* interspersed with three black bulls. A temple looms in the background and a saffron sky dominates the image's colour palette. Shridhar's choice of colour is akin to Gautam's own colour choices; the use of saffron in the sky mirrors Gautam's colouring of the *kurta-pyjama* worn by the cow-hybrid figure in *Cow Raj.*

The use of satire is clear in Gautam's work. Moving to the cartoon in animated form, the 1954 animated film version of *Animal Farm* by Halas & Batchelor Studio in England, based on the novel by George Orwell, also employs satire. A direct allegory and satire, the film embodied the 'pure animal fully into animal animation for one of the first occasions in

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[495] Noopur Tiwari, 'A French Comic Book Uses India's War on Beef to Illustrate the Dangers of Hindutva', *Scroll*, 20 July 2017, https://scroll.in/magazine/844269/a-french-comic-book-uses-indias-war-on-beef-to-illustrate-the-dangers-of-hindutva.
[496] Greeshma Kuthar, 'How Coastal Karnataka Was Saffronised; Part 5: Gauraksha Goes Mainstream, Hindu Groups Launch National Cow Weekly in Udupi-India News , Firstpost', *Firstpost*, 5 April 2019, sec. India, https://www.firstpost.com/india/how-coastal-karnataka-was-saffronised-part-5-gauraksha-goes-mainstream-hindu-groups-launch-national-cow-weekly-in-udupi-6395801.html.

animation history'.[497] Halas and Batchelor deliberately moved away from humour by using the pure form of the animal; traditionally, animal cartoons were seen as funny: 'to turn this satire into an animated film was to face the issue of dramatizing an animal story in which the characters must be as seriously portrayed as in a human story. No animal could be sentimentalized for the sake of the box office—the idea behind the story would not permit this. Once this story was selected, a new kind of cartoon film was to be made— a serious cartoon.'[498] The seriousness of the cartoon and its relation to animals is clearly highlighted in the film's themes which are drawn from Orwell's book. The film 'faithfully preserves the anger, compassion and sardonic humour of Orwell's novel'.[499] In its representation of the reality of politics, 'the cruelty of certain incidents isn't muted' and the film is not suited for children in the way that a Disney movie might be.[500] Gautam's own images portray serious themes like acts of violence against Dalits in the name of the cow. In using the cow figure in his images, he satirises politics in that he uses the cow-as-image to show a larger issue of caste politics in society. This is similar to the way *Animal Farm* is constructed.

Some parallels can also be drawn between Gautam's images and anime by the Japanese Studio Ghibli. Particularly, the cow hybrid figure in *Cow Raj* bears resemblance to the pigs in the film *Spirited Away* (2001). The pigs in *Spirited Away* were also once humans before they became pigs—Chihiro, the protagonist in the film, watches as her parents are turned into pigs, signifying greed. In both the anime of *Spirited Away* and Gautam's *Cow Raj* and *Gauraksha,* a symbolism is then used to signify a larger idea: greed in the form of the pigs and contemporary caste-politics in the form of the cow. Of course, Japanese anime is moving image, and

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[497] Paul Wells, 'The Bear Who Wasn't: Bestial Ambivalence,' in *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2008), 55.

[498] John Halas, *Visual Scripting* (New York: Hastings House, 1976) in Wells, 'The Bear Who Wasn't: Bestial Ambivalence', 54.

[499] 'Animal Farm (1954) – Nostalgia Central', 6 July 2014, https://nostalgiacentral.com/movies/movies-a-to-k/movies-a/animal-farm-1954/.

[500] 'Animal Farm (1954) – Nostalgia Central'.

Gautam's work is a static single frame, but anime is drawn from Manga, the traditional Japanese style of cartoons. In Manga art, characters are not set in stone, meaning that they could have several story arcs that transcend boundaries. For instance, a character might know another character in one story arc but they might be strangers in another arc.[501] This is a good parallel to draw in terms of narratives. While Gautam's images are viewed as individual pieces and not as part of a series or set of panels put together as a comic strip, the figure of the cow is perhaps a result of several different story arcs that merge into one plane. The story arcs in Gautam's work combine religiosity and human violence, while also bringing out environmental degradation and in turn the suffering of the cow-as-animal.

A Comparative Analysis of *Cow Raj, Gauraksha* and Calendar Imagery

The idea of death is a central theme brought out in both *Cow Raj* and *Gauraksha.* Visually, the foregrounding of death in *Cow Raj* is seen through the figures sprawled on the ground after having been lynched. The placement of the single lone figure in white, lying near the horizon line, further reinforces death in caste terms. Commonly, Dalits are separately cremated from other Hindus, and most often not even within the same grounds or wider geographical region. In fact, upper caste Hindu cremations are usually tasked to Dalits who are expected to gather the ashes and maintain cremation grounds. Similarly, Dalits are also required to get rid of the carcass of the cow, and so their interaction with the cow is often through the lens of death. Shivani Kapoor argues that the carcass of the cow was 'inaugurated…as a political subject' when Dalits refused to engage with dead cows after the Una flogging incident.[502] As a form of protest against the flogging, cow carcasses were left to rot across the town and in front of major political sites. In portraying death through the sprawled figures on the ground in *Cow Raj* and the skeletal carcasses of cow and human in *Gau Raksha,* Gautam's explicit depictions also

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[501] Dani Cavallaro, *The Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2006), 15.

[502] Kapoor, "'Your Mother, You Bury Her'", 5.

inaugurate the cow as a political subject and further establish his images as a response to the violent nature of flogging itself.

Even though the dead cow in *Gauraksha* represents a violent theme, the stillness that permeates Gautam's image is curious. This is in contrast to a similar decapitated head of a cow from a calendar art image from the early twentieth century called *Ashtabhuja Devi* by the Ravi Varma Press (see Fig.1.9). The calendar image shows Goddess Durga riding a lion and attacking two butchers who have decapitated a cow. The cow's head here is seen with a little blood and the sword that decapitated the cow is also bloodied. This image, made under colonial rule, led the British to fear that it was an 'anti-cow-killing document'.[503] The image was then defended as actually being a scene from the epic Mahabharata and that the 'cow' was actually a buffalo. It was finally agreed that a reprint of the original version would be made where the blood would be removed and the cow rendered black (see Fig.1.10).[504] As an 'anti-cow-killing document', the calendar image presents similarities to Gautam's images as responses to acts of violence in the name of the cow. In fact, Gautam's works are responses to the type of message on cows spread by *Ashtabhuja Devi.* Visually, the dynamism in the calendar images (the initial image as well as the reprinted one) is missing in Gautam's image. The calendar images are vibrant in their colouring, and highlight violence using a crowded composition, swords, and the expressions on both the men and goddess' faces. The dead bovine in the original and the reprint is striking. In many ways, the *Ashtabhuja Devi* scene represents a scene of battle with its movement, clashing bodies, and overall carnage. In *Gauraksha,* Gautam uses a palette of brown and white. The scene is still, with the skeletons of both figures sitting in an empty space. The dynamism and carnage of *Ashtabhuja Devi* is replaced by a clinical and dispassionate mood. Overall, *Gauraksha* appears more as a quiet reflection on a violent act.

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[503] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 110.

[504] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 110-112.

Another comparison of *Gauraksha* to calendar images is in terms of the landscape that the skeletons are placed in. Many calendar images depicting the cow expose a significantly Hindu oriented bias. For instance, in *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay (the Cow with 84 Deities)* (see Fig.1.12)*,* a 'demon' figure is seen attacking a cow. This demon was understood to be part of the Muslim or Dalit community, emphasising that these communities were involved in the killing of cows. A man in yellow identified as the Hindu *Dharmaraj* is seen facing the demon with his hands in the air, supporting the idea that Hindus protect cows against communities like Muslims and Dalits. Like *Ashtabhuja Devi,* the original print *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay* was amended to remove the demon figure to make it a more neutral document that did not highlight anti-cow killing biases (see Fig.1.13). Interestingly, in the amended print, the background was changed from a landscape of rocks and grass to a temple.[505] The inclusion of a Hindu site of worship helped assert the cow as a specifically Hindu icon in an implicit manner. The change in background in *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay* highlights the importance of implicit visual markers in conveying a message. In Gautam's image, elements of both nature and industry are seen. By employing these visual markers of natural and industrial components, Gautam implicitly suggests a natural cow-as-animal set against an industrial landscape of capitalism. Capitalism is more evident in Gautam's *King 'makers'* (discussed later in the chapter), but here it is of value to remember that his work should be read as a complex set of entanglements where the violence against the cow and the human cannot be set against each other. Ultimately, both violent actions seem to be the result of human follies. In the same way that Gautam has included natural and industrial elements in a single frame, the issues of violence against the cow and the human are multifaceted.

Gautam's response to lynching and flogging is also reflected in the titles of the two pieces. *Cow Raj* (translated as *Cow Rule*) portrays a cow-figure ruling over the land; this is

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[505] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods,* 108-112.

akin to a king watching over his kingdom and protecting its people. Here, the cow as the king becomes the 'protector', particularly the 'protector' of a Hindu land attempting to be rid of people from marginalised communities who engage with the cow in a manner that has been violently proscribed by traditional upper caste Hindus (as indicated by the Una flogging). *Gauraksha* (translated as *Cow Protection*) depicts a dead cow and dead human in skeletal forms. Here, the cow and human both require to be 'protected' from the violent mobs like the ones at Una. In fact, traditional upper caste Hindus call themselves *gau rakshaks* or *cow protectionists.* These *gau rakshaks* most often affiliate themselves to extreme Hindutva and take on the role of 'protectors' of the cow, similar to the cow figure ruling over the land in *Cow Raj. Gauraksha's* direct association with lynching is also suggested by the caption of the image on Instagram.[506] The caption is an extract from a story titled *Gau Hatya* or *Cow Killing* by Omprakash Valmiki, a Dalit author. In this story, Valmiki describes a village where a man is accused of slaughtering a cow and then subsequently lynched by a village mob for the slaughter. In portraying human and cow skeletons, Gautam's image is a direct reflection of this story.

This section has shown how Gautam has centralised death in his images. Comparing his work to earlier calendar prints has underlined Gautam's quiet and thoughtful style when depicting violent themes such as lynching resulting in death. Moreover, the section has analysed Gautam's clever titles as being instrumental to understanding his images.

The Role of Hybrids in *Cow Raj*

Turning to *Cow Raj,* this section focuses on the role of hybrid figures and mask wearing as visual tools that force viewers to examine interactions between the human and cow. In *Cow Raj,* a hybrid half-cow, half-human creature confronts the viewer with its bold gaze and

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[506] 'Siddhesh Gautam on Instagram: Gauraksha, 2021, an Excerpt from Omprakash Valmiki's Short Story Gauhatya', Instagram, 9 September 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CTmR4SbPi58/.

occupies the focus of the image. Here, the hybrid cow rules over a human terrain, sporting a bovine head on a human body.

It is important here to remember that hybrid creatures are prominent in the divine topography of Indian Hinduism. For instance, Ganesha is a god with a human body that carries the weight of a heavy elephant head. There is also Narasimha, one of the avatars of Lord Vishnu, who is half-lion and half-man; Lord Vishnu takes on this form solely to kill a demon who was safeguarded from being killed by either human or animal. Similarly, Hanuman, the monkey-god, also falls into the category of hybrid creatures, where hybridity falls somewhere between being half-animal and half-human in depiction. Indeed, Philip Lutgendorf classifies Hanuman as a 'supernatural hybrid',[507] traced to the birth of monkey-gods, which is a result of the mating of gods with female monkeys. These 'supernatural' hybrids possess qualities that are monkey-like, human, and divine: they are active, chatter continuously and bare their teeth, but they are also human in that they perform rituals and speak a human tongue. Their super-humanness or god-like state (divinity) comes from their ability to shape-shift and fly. Visual codes were often developed by artists to explicitly indicate that certain cues denoted specific hybrid gods—in Hanuman's case, these visual codes initially included a tail and nonhuman monkey face.[508] The tail and nonhuman monkey face were later replaced by depictions of human features on a furless body, thereby removing the monkeyness related to Hanuman's animal nature. Similarly, other animal visual codes were replaced by increasingly human features, making the hybrid god more like humans than animals.

As Emma Aston observes in her study on part-animal gods in the Greek arts, combination seems to be a prominent feature in part-animal gods: 'combination is the

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[507] Philip Lutgendorf, 'Evolving a monkey: Hanuman, poster art and postcolonial anxiety,' in *Beyond Appearances? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India,* ed. Sumathi Ramaswamy (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2003), 75.
[508] Lutgendorf, 'Evolving a monkey: Hanuman, poster art and postcolonial anxiety', 83.

arrangement of human with non-human parts within a single body'.[509] Gautam's hybrid creature subscribes to combination in that he has arranged a human with a nonhuman cow head, similar to other divine hybridism from India. Aston's 'combination' is then in line with Lutgendorf's framing of the supernatural hybrid where hybrid creatures are formed from a combination of the divine, human and animal.

Ultimately it seems like the lack of monkeyness in the case of Hanuman, or other animality in the case of the other divine hybrid animal-gods, is of no significance to their worship.[510] Rather, these divine animal-gods are viewed as hybrids, and as humans with some animal tendencies. The fact that they are animals first and then humans is of no relevance. Of note here is that Kamadhenu, the divine cow, retains her cow-like qualities for only her face is of a human woman atop the body of a cow. This depiction of Kamadhenu seems specifically linked to the Shaivite (those who worship Lord Shiva) tradition. Kamadhenu is otherwise not depicted as a hybrid, but as a divine cow with no human features. Gautam has emphasised the human nature of the hybrid even though it is significantly a cow. He even describes his hybrid as a 'human figure', underlining its human nature over its animality.[511]

The difference between Greece (where Emma Aston discusses hybrids) and India is that hybridism in Greek gods reflects a world of monsters—hybrids like the Sphinx or the Minotaur are all categorised as monstrous.[512] However, in India, Ganesha, Hanuman, and even Narasimha, are not monsters in the threatening sense, and are treated well in their roles as gods. This is particularly significant when recalling that Gautam's work is a response to lynching and flogging. The hybrid creature in his work, if considered a god, rules over a land where the

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[509] Emma Aston, 'Part-Animal Gods', in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*, ed. Gordon Lindsay Campbell (Oxford University Press, 2014), 371, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199589425.013.022.

[510] Lutgendorf, 'Evolving a monkey: Hanuman, poster art and postcolonial anxiety', 108.

[511] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.

[512] Aston, 'Part-Animal Gods', 373.

dead Dalit bodies sprawled on the ground are the 'monsters' due to their alleged killing of a cow. Through a clever use of irony and satire, Gautam subtly hints at the hybrid creature being the 'monster' in his image rather than a 'god'. The monster, possibly the *gau rakshak,* rules over a land of lynched marginalised communities, gazing unabashedly at the viewer and underscoring its autonomy.

Of significance here is that this 'monster' is created by humans to defend their violence against other humans. Therefore, this emphasises that the cow loses its animality and instead becomes a voice for the people but not of its own accord. A personification takes place where the cow then is ascribed human characteristics and is forced to be viewed through that lens. In fact, Gautam describes his hybrid figure as 'man personified himself as divine' showing that it is a human ascribed personification.[513] As mentioned earlier, the cow's animality is perhaps irrelevant for its actual worship. But the presence of the cow hybrid in Gautam's picture signals that the cow is a tool used by the people to represent a message. Instead of humans taking ownership for their violent nature, they use the cow as a shield by making it an image.

Unmasking Cow Raj

The cow head on a male body in *Cow Raj* is also a reminder of the use of masks in politics. The use of masks in politics is widespread from Donald Trump to Narendra Modi. In fact, Modi's use of masks in his political campaigns goes back as early as 2007, before his first term as Prime Minister of India in 2014. The Modi mask, a rubber mask that is detailed with features of Modi's face (but not as a cartoon), is a popular feature in his campaigns and rallies. Crowds wearing the Modi mask as they listen to his speeches result in a 'curious practice of collective masquerade'.[514] The crowds appear homogeneous and are devoid of any individual facial

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[513] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.
[514] Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, 'Reflections in the Crowd Delegation, Verisimilitude, and the Modi Mask', in *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*, ed. Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen,

identity. Their masquerading behind Modi's identity strengthens Modi's message and presence as a political figure, as 'under the mask, the people do not become present except in the leader's image'.[515]

Similarly, Gautam's hybrid creature also appears to be wearing a cow mask. Since only the head of the figure is of a cow, it gives the impression of a human donning a cow mask to hide their persona. Parallels can be drawn between the cow mask in Gautam's work and the Modi mask. The establishment of Modi's identity as a political leader through the use of the Modi mask in crowds corresponds with the political leanings of the cow in India today. The 'practice of collective masquerade' that Modi achieves is mirrored in Gautam's hybrid creature hiding behind a cow head: masquerade is seen in the cow-as-image echoing the leader's image. While Gautam's hybrid stands alone and is not part of a crowd, the masking of an individual identity is apparent. The mask ensures that the hybrid is not required to acknowledge the violence perpetrated by humans (the acts of lynching and flogging). Instead, the mask helps the violent mobs hide behind the cow, making it a mass symbol of a collective violence of right-wing ideologies. Usually, mass terms linked to animals are in terms of meat where the individual identity of the animal is then lost.[516] Here too, the mass representation of the cow as a symbol of violence supersedes the individual nature of the cow-as-animal, reinforced by the lack of animality in the hybrid cow figure. This kind of violence is not in terms of the slaughter of the cow for its meat, but rather a response to the slaughter that embodies violence against the human (as a subject of lynching) and the cow (as a symbol for violent human actions).

The use of cow masks recalls works by other artists in India like Sajan Mani's *Art will never die, but COW?* and Sujatro Ghosh's *Cow Project*. As elaborated in Chapter Three,

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and Christophe Jaffrelot (Oxford University Press, 2019), 91, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190078171.003.0005.

[515] Ghassem-Fachandi, 'Reflections in the Crowd Delegation, Verisimilitude, and the Modi Mask', 94.
[516] Carol J Adams, 'The War on Compassion,' *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, no.14 (Autumn 2010): 6.

Mani's use of a cow mask was as a representation of upper caste knowledge production. In his two versions of *Art will never die, but COW?*, he places the cow mask on his own head, obscuring his face and portraying a cow head on a human body. In his first version of the piece, Mani walks through the streets of New Delhi as a cow, finally entering the India Art Fair. The second version of the piece shows Mani squatting and rising up, holding the cow mask on his head. Mani's two versions intended to highlight the dominance of Brahmanic upper caste spaces in the Indian art world. On the other hand, Sujatro Ghosh's *Cow Project* is a series of photographs that show women wearing a cow mask in a variety of spaces in India. Ghosh's objective was to suggest that cows are safer and more protected than women. While both Mani and Ghosh share different messages through their use of a cow mask, the similarities in terms of the cow standing as a symbol of a larger human message is noteworthy. This is similar to Gautam's use of the cow mask, where the cow represents a larger human idea which is, in other words, the cow-as-image.

'King' makers

This section focuses on Gautam's work titled *'King' makers* (2020) (see Fig.4.3) and highlights the direct effects of human industrialisation on the health of cows. While not a response to lynching and flogging like the other two images discussed in this chapter, *'King' makers* plays a key role in the conversation around cows from an ecological standpoint and highlights Gautam's framing of an aesthetic ecology.

Gautam's interest in the welfare of cows stems from his upbringing and a relatedness to cows, as in the case of both G. Chandru and Sajan Mani. He mentioned that his extended family are cattle-rearers and that in being surrounded by cattle, there is a reverence for the animal as part of the family. Gautam recalls an instance where a calf was expected to be birthed soon. The rituals and functions for the mother of the calf, and the excitement at its birth, was

similar to the anticipatory enthusiasm in the birth of human babies within his family.[517] Embedded in this incident is a relatedness of friendship and familial nurturing for the cow, resulting in Gautam's care for the cow (animal welfare). This relatedness has also extended to a concern for the way the cow is perceived in India, where lynching and flogging incidents have taken place in the name of the cow as represented in Gautam's *Cow Raj* and *Gauraksha.* In this section, Gautam's relatedness to the cow is made visible through his rendering of the cow's exposure to a polluted environment.

In this image, a grey cow stands on top of a large pile of waste and rubbish in a landfill. The foreground is dominated by two men facing each other and smiling. To most Indians, these faces are recognisable as Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, two of India's leading industrialists who own the Reliance Group and the Adani Group respectively. Ambani and Adani gaze outside of the picture frame, smiling in an almost cunning manner, as though holding a secret that the public does not have access to. The image of Adani and Ambani is clearly based on a similar photograph of the two men, where they are in the same position with the same facial expressions (see Fig.4.4). This photograph is from a public event that they possibly attended together. Gautam's rendering of these recognisable faces then mirrors Kemnitz's definition of political cartoons as dependent on 'the viewer's recognition of the characters, subjects, and events depicted'.[518]

The composition of the three protagonists of the image is telling. Even though the cow stands tallest in terms of its framing, its greyscale rendering as well as smaller occupation in proportion to the entire image frame as compared to Ambani and Adani perhaps indicates that the cow is secondary. The sartorial code of *Cow Raj* is reflected in *'King' makers*: Ambani is wearing a saffron coloured shirt while Adani sports a saffron coloured tie. The saffronisation

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[517] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.
[518] Kemnitz, 'The Cartoon as a Historical Source', 83.

of the two men through their clothes indicates links to right-wing India and Hindutva, as explained earlier. The men are otherwise clad in Western wear, donning dark-coloured suits rather than the traditional *kurta pyjama* seen in *Cow Raj*. Western suits like the ones Ambani and Adani wear are often used to portray a certain educated sector of society. Interestingly, B. R. Ambedkar himself is shown in his images and statues wearing a suit to show his high degree of education from Western universities.[519]

Gautam's work directly addresses the negative impact of industrialisation on animals like cows. Landfills in India are a common problem and are often found at the outskirts of cities. Due to their location away from eyesight, they are not considered a problem. The invisibility of landfills is akin to caste in India and even in terms of geographical positioning, landfills are often found near Dalit settlements. A case study showed that in Varanasi, locals felt that cows did not go to landfills near Dalit homes due to the presence of meat, and only came to landfills that contained waste from Hindu homes.[520] That the cow is associated with religion even within the framework of waste and rubbish is unique to the Indian subcontinent, though the problem of landfills and harm to animals remains a global issue. Cows therefore become participants in the 'ritual economy of human-nonhuman relations' of waste in India.[521] The numerous landfills that exist across the country are feeding grounds for cows who eat plastic and other waste and fall extremely ill.[522] The landfills in *'King' makers* do not represent any particular place, but their depiction is certainly influenced by landfills in and around

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[519] See Tartakov, 'The Politics of Popular Art', 88-97, and Jaoul, 'Learning the use of Symbolic Means: Dalits, Ambedkar Statues, and the State in Uttar Pradesh' ,98-126 for a comprehensive study on Ambedkar statues, their iconography, their insertion into the public space and Dalit viewership. I have also discussed Ambedkar statues in the Introduction.

[520] Assa Doron, 'Stench and Sensibilities: On Living with Waste, Animals and Microbes in India', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 32, no. S1 (2021): 30, https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12380.

[521] Doron, 'Stench and Sensibilities: On Living with Waste, Animals and Microbes in India', 30.

[522] Adam Withnall, 'Inside India's Plastic Cows: How Sacred Animals Are Left to Line Their Stomachs with Polythene', *The Independent*, 25 February 2019, sec. News, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/india-delhi-plastic-cows-shelters-bjp-modi-gaushala-a8794756.html.

Gurugram, Gautam's place of residence.[523] These landfills represent a space filled with the waste generated from Ambani and Adani's products, which is ironically the source of their wealth.

Landfills like those around Gurugram are often visited by stray cows in search of food. A ban on cow slaughter and cow transport, as well as a ban on the sale of beef in several Indian states, has resulted in diminished incomes for cow owners. Consequently, cows become abandoned due to a lack of infrastructure to care for them, causing a marked increase in the number of stray cows.[524] Some of these stray cows are relocated to *gau shalas* or shelters where they are cared for by the government. Unfortunately, the conditions in these *gau shalas* are dubious, and the cows are not treated well within these spaces. On her extensive fieldwork in various *gau shalas* across the country, Yamini Narayanan witnessed cows being exploited for their dairy production. The same cows were often forced to mate and were also separated from their calves so their milk could instead be used to fulfil more economic purposes.[525] The culpability of industrialisation, capitalism and the role of a ban on cow slaughter then all form conjunctures from which to read *'King' makers.*

The title of the work, *'King' makers*, is also significant in complicating this particular image further. While, as mentioned, the message of the image is quite direct in terms of its ecological value, unpacking the idea of a 'kingmaker' is useful. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a kingmaker as 'a person who uses political influence to control the appointment of a king or (in later extended use) other person of authority'.[526] The question of the identity of the

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[523] Siddhesh Gautam, interview by author, Online, September 3, 2021, transcript with author.

[524] See Neeraj Mohan, 'Rising Stray Cattle Numbers Leave Haryana Gaushalas Crowded', *Hindustan Times*, 1 May 2022, https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/chandigarh-news/rising-stray-cattle-numbers-leave-haryana-gaushalas-crowded-101651345158276.html.In the state of Haryana, stray cattle numbers have increased by 51,000 in just one year.

[525] Yamini Narayanan, '"Cow Is a Mother, Mothers Can Do Anything for Their Children!" Gaushalas as Landscapes of Anthropatriarchy and Hindu Patriarchy', *Hypatia* 34, no. 2 (ed 2019): 195–221, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12460

[526] Oxford English Dictionary, 'Kingmaker, n.' (Oxford University Press, July 2023), Oxford English Dictionary, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9007259342.

'kingmaker' in Gautam's image then becomes pertinent. Is the cow the kingmaker, or are Adani and Ambani the kingmakers? If the cow is the kingmaker in the image, the cow's influence in politics has helped the growth of the industries owned by Adani and Ambani. This growth is parallel to the rise of cow politics which is synonymous with current rule under the BJP government. Perhaps the image is suggesting that Adani and Ambani are the kingmakers, influencing the Indian population and ensuring the cow then becomes 'king'. This is comparable to the way the cow is represented in *Cow Raj,* ruling over a Hindu land.

Whether the cow is a 'king' or a 'kingmaker', Gautam's work highlights the cow as suffering because of industrialisation and capitalism. This is especially ironic if the cow is 'king' because it is unlikely that a 'king' would stand amidst a pile of rubbish and consume waste. Industrialisation is especially emphasised in this image through the presence of Adani and Ambani, but Gautam also hints at industrialisation in *Gauraksha* through the depiction of the looming construction site behind the river. In both pieces, the cow's existence as an animal is diminished and its functionality as an image remains at the forefront.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that Siddhesh Gautam uses his digital images to underscore the politics of the cow in relation to caste violence and ecocide. In order to do this, he mobilises the cow's iconography as cow-as-image and cow-as-animal and satirises this iconography to show violence in the name of the cow, as well as harm to the cow in the form of environmental destruction through industrialisation and capitalist forces. I approach reading Siddhesh Gautam's work through an analysis that looks at caste contexts and animal contexts in his work. This enables an understanding of Gautam's rendering of the cow and human together: as a human-cow hybrid, as a skeletal human and a skeletal cow, and as cow-as-animal on a pile of waste caused by humans. Such an approach to Gautam's work underlines the way in which he

has considered the disruption of social hierarchies like caste as well as the aesthetic ecologies of the cow-as-animal.

In *Cow Raj,* he responds to the flogging at Una and other similar incidents of lynching by rendering a hybrid cow gazing outward while a pile of dead bodies lies behind this hybrid. In subtly using hybridity that is usually associated with Hindu religiosity (like Ganesha and Hanuman), Gautam places his hybrid figure in a divine realm. However, he subverts this religiosity by ensuring that his figure satirises the idea of 'cow rule' in India. In *Cow Raj,* Gautam also appears to use masks to politicise and hide individual identities, making the cow stand for a larger human idea. Gautam's *Gauraksha,* also a response to the Una flogging, further reinforces the cow-as-image and connects this to caste atrocities in the visual form of skeletons lying on the ground. *Gauraksha* exposes the suffering of the human and the suffering of the cow, especially highlighting that the death of the human was caused by harm to the cow, but that this 'harm' to the cow is a complex narrative that involves protection of the cow against lower caste communities like Dalits. Last, *'King' makers* highlights the relationship between deteriorating landscapes, the cow, and industrialisation, through the use of recognisable figures like Ambani and Adani, a common practice in political cartooning.

Gautam's images make visible cow politics in India, as well as the ramifications of industrialisation on cows. The images draw attention to larger themes regarding the cow. It is evident that the cow operates on two levels simultaneously, as image and as animal. These two forms of existence are not independent of one another, but rather exist as a conjunction, mobilised by groups to their own advantage. The use of cow imagery by artists like Siddhesh Gautam further complicates this picture. Gautam's presence on Instagram and circulation of these images through that medium reiterates that cow politics is extremely prevalent in 'everyday' life in India. To read his images through a singular religious lens would be to make less visible the problems faced by Dalits and also by cows, both in relation to one another and

as separate groups. Caste-cow-politics in conjunction with understanding the cow-as-animal is particular to the Indian subcontinent. Gautam's work reconciles these different contexts and frameworks to present a new conjuncture where the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal come together to confront the power of social hierarchies like caste. Additionally, his work shows that a contextualising of the medium in helping the circulation of such images and further enhancing their perception is important. Overall, Gautam highlights that the cow's turbulent iconography in its image can be satirised and mobilised to underscore the issues that take place in the name of its image.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE MATERIAL COW: KIRTIKA KAIN

> My materials are my words and they are not dictated, they come from the same embryonic silence from which the art is born. They are potent and charged with the politics of my body. In the cacophony of these heightened times, it is this silence that I return to, that I know to be true.
>
> (*Stone Idols* exhibition text by Kirtika Kain) [527]

In early 2021, the Sydney based artist Kirtika Kain (b.1990) participated in a show titled *Stone Idols* at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney, Australia. The show was a response to Babytai Kamble's book *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons we Broke* (originally written in Marathi in 1986 and translated to English in 2008)*,* which describes instances of caste and patriarchy from Kamble's own life. As a response to *The Prisons we Broke,* the work in the show contained histories of trauma, violence, celebration and hope. These histories were further underlined by Kain's choice of materials for the work, highlighting a link between material and the narratives Kain was both drawing from and portraying. Two such works shown in this exhibition were *The Womb of a Jackal* and *Jina Amucha.* While both works are part of a larger response to Kamble's text, the works align with different aspects of *The Prisons we Broke* and celebrate her autobiographical narrative.

On the one hand, *The Womb of a Jackal* (2020) (see Fig. 5.1) is a print on disused silk screen, and was created using genuine vermillion, *sindoor* pigment and crushed cow dung. To produce this work, Kain exposed a certain passage from the Manusmriti on a silk screen and used an adhesive from the back to secure the print. She then used vermillion, sindoor pigment and cow dung on the front, over the exposed text, to attain texture and depth. The entire piece is dominated by the Manusmriti text in *Devnagari* script which is coloured red from the sindoor pigment and vermillion. Smudges of the sindoor and cow dung are seen over parts of the text,

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[527] Kirtika Kain, exhibition text displayed in *Stone Idols* exhibit, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, 28 January 2021 to 27 February 2021.

blurring sections, and rendering the text slightly unreadable in these areas. The background is a yellowish golden and resembles an illuminated manuscript. In fact, its display in *Stone Idols* created an 'undeniable aura' around the work as the spotlights of the gallery highlighted the work's gold glints, enhancing its feel as a sacred manual.[528] Due to the rapidity of the screen-printing process, certain 'errors' became a part of this work.[529] For example, an extra smudge of cow dung appears on a part of the screen, and the passage from the Manusmriti is slightly off-centre. Additionally, since Kain used a disused screen, she had to work around the condition of the screen itself—the slit on the right, for instance, was already part of the silk. This placement of the slit (though an accident) heightens the violent nature of the entire print. The red of the sindoor pigment adds to this violence and intensity. The smudges of cow dung also draw their colour from the same sindoor and complement the hues of bright red text with darker red tinges.

The title of this piece comes from Chapter Five of the Manusmriti, which discusses the rules for women in Hindu society. Particularly, verse 5.164 from which Kain has drawn her title, elucidates the status of a woman in relation to her rebirth or *karma* if she is unfaithful to her husband. The verse reads 'by violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters *the womb of a jackal*, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment of) her sin' (emphasis added).[530] These rules for women from the *Manusmriti* demonstrate two hierarchical underpinnings. First, a woman is relegated into a world of animals if she shows signs of deceit and disloyalty. This shows that the world of animals is considered lower in status to the world of humans and is equated to punishment. Additionally, deceit and disloyalty are often linked to the jackal in Hindu mythology; jackals are considered cunning

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[528] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author.
[529] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author.
[530] This verse is taken from Chapter Five of the Manusmriti. This version of the text was sent to me by Kirtika Kain and is the version she has used for her work.

creatures.[531] Second, the verses of Chapter Five indicate that no consequences apply to disloyalty by men, showing that either men are considered trustworthy or that they are of higher prestige than women. Furthermore, in addition to the Manusmriti dictating the roles of women in society and the caste order, the text is also instrumental in perpetuating endogamy which in turn perpetuates and ensures caste remains 'pure'.

Since the work is drawn from a patriarchal text like the Manusmriti that denigrates women, the links to women and their role in society is undeniable. This is further reflected in the work's use of sindoor and cow dung. The slit (a result of the screen being disused) seems to reflect marital rape with the redness of sindoor and dung indicating the spilling of blood in this violent act. The role of the wife as procreator, her virginity and its association with blood, resonate with the slit on this screen print and the redness of the materials used. The different kinds of violence that women face, especially in their role as wife, are thus highlighted in this work. Kain initiates a visual violence that resembles women entering the womb of a jackal.

On the other hand, Kain's *Jina Amucha* (2020) (see Fig. 5.2) is made up of eight panels, each 110 by 100 cm. The panels are placed in two rows of four with no gaps between them. They are layered with a wide range of materials: cow dung, tar, charcoal, plaster, beeswax, human hair, coconut broom grass, coconut husk, religious thread, gold leaf, rope, and Indian cotton. Though the work uses a combination of all these materials, a certain blackness, possibly stemming from the cow dung, tar and charcoal, is the most visually striking. Particularly interesting about this blackness is that it is not a single, uniform black, but rather, the piece is made up of swirling layers of different tints and shades of the dung, tar and charcoal. The swirling nature of these compositional material elements also adds to an exceptional dynamism that resonates with an almost geological surface, inspired by the cliff faces and rocks found

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[531] Wendy Doniger, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, Reprint (University of California Press, 2018), 77.

along the Sydney coastline. In fact, Kain describes the surface of *Jina Amucha* as 'centuries of sedimentation' of a 'geological compression' held within Dalit bodies like her own. [532] Interspersed between the black layers are glints of gold and red from the gold leaf and religious thread. The gold leaf shines particularly brightly against the dark backdrop of black dung, tar and charcoal, suggesting a shining 'Dalit body' that reflects joy in an environment of rot and decay. [533]

As mentioned above, this work is a visual representation of Babytai Kamble's seminal Dalit feminist work *Jina Amucha,* translated as *The Prisons we Broke*. [534] Kain's inspiration was drawn from the translation by Maya Pandit. The book *Jina Amucha* talks about the life of the Mahars in early twentieth-century India, written from the perspective of Babytai Kamble in an autobiographical account of her own lived experiences. The book shows how women continue to live their lives despite the trauma they face, humming tunes to their children as they wash clothes on rocks. Kamble was especially inspired by B. R. Ambedkar who helped the Mahars break free from the prisons of caste. Kain was struck by the book as it did not 'censor the carnage of caste'. [535] While the book served as the background and inspiration for the entirety of the show *Stone Idols,* Kain's piece *Jina Amucha* was inspired by a few marked episodes from Kamble's book. The sheer size of the work helps achieve a certain monumentalism of a long-lost inheritance of Dalits in Maharashtra.

A common material in both pieces is cow dung, a substance that has several associations in India, largely with ritual, divinity and religion. For Kain, cow dung has served as her relatedness with the cow, since her diasporic experience of the cow and caste is embedded in

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[532] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author.

[533] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author. In my interview with Kain, she referred to the gold as being symbolic of the Dalit body. My analysis draws from this interview.

[534] Baby Kamble (translated by Maya Pandit), *The Prisons We Broke* (Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd, 2020).

[535] Kirtika Kain, exhibition text displayed in *Stone Idols* exhibit, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, 28 January 2021 to 27 February 2021.

personal and collective histories of her family. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to then understand the material presence of the cow through cow dung in these two works of Kirtika Kain by reading Kain's work through an analysis of her voice as an artist, her exhibition and curatorial statements, and her personal and collective inherited histories. This chapter on Kain shows, in particular, that a method of collaboration and shared dialogue serves as a way in which to approach images like hers located in diasporic caste experiences. The chapter will illustrate that the scope of this material presence of cow dung is beyond the cow's associations with divinity, and Kain disrupts this divinity by reclaiming cow dung as her own material. Furthermore, in disrupting the hegemony associated with cow dung and presenting it as a material reclaimed by her, Kain underlines an aesthetic ecology of material presence of substances like dung.

It is important to distinguish this chapter on Kain from the other three case studies presented in this thesis. The primary distinction lies in the relationship between artist and cow, and the subsequent portrayal of the cow. Kain's portrayal is much more abstracted through the use of material, while the other three artists articulate clear representations of the cow.

The chapter first looks at the function of cow dung in India, leading to an examination of the sacred and the profane. Second, the idea of materiality and materials is contextualised in relation to Kain's work. Third, Kain's biography as an inherited personal and collective history is highlighted, as well as the way in which her work draws from these narratives. Fourth, a brief exploration of sindoor and cow dung are delineated. Finally, the chapter concludes by analysing the material presence of the cow in Kain's images. Overall, the chapter argues that Kain reclaims the associations of cow dung as her own and thus disrupts the caste and religious associations held within this material.

The Functions of Cow Dung

In order to understand the material presence of the cow through cow dung in Kain's work, it seems pertinent to first explore the functions and associations of cow dung as a material in India. As shown in Chapter One, the cow is perceived as Gaumata and Kamadhenu, and gained its status as an image of upper caste Hinduism through calendar art's representations of the cow as mother and divine. Since calendar art was a widely distributed visual medium that entered people's homes, the cow-as-image (of motherhood and the divine) began to occupy a central position in people's daily lives. However, cows, in addition to these associations with motherhood and divinity, are also linked to agricultural fields and farming. In these contexts, they are considered children who require constant care.[536] In this way, cows particularly enter the daily space of women in India, predominantly those who are involved in agricultural practices. This results in women not only physically caring for the cows they own, but also ensuring that they make enough money to support these cows. These care practices are reflected in Radhika Govindrajan's ethnographic writing on cows in Uttarakhand. Govindrajan describes the story of a woman (Munni) who stays with her cow (Radha) through the night because the cow is ill. Despite the threat of a leopard attack, Munni refuses to leave Radha alone for the night, stating that Radha's illness was caused by Munni leaving her in the first place. The intimate connection and entanglement of Munni and Radha's relationship is also reflected in Munni's simple statement: 'so what if my family is not here? These animals are my family too'.[537] Munni's decision to stay with Radha shows a relatedness between human and cow, linked to care practices, and also associated with a connection of familial ties that extend and go back and forth between woman and cow.

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[536] Catrien Notermans, 'Prayers of Cow Dung: Women Sculpturing Fertile Environments in Rural Rajasthan (India)', *Religions* 10, no. 2 (February 2019): 5, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020071.

[537] Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies,* 2-4.

A connection of the cow to women is also visible in calendar art; here, for instance, the cow's body contains eighty-four gods within its frame, placing the body in the divine and maternal realm. The protection of the cow's body as divine and maternal object is a role taken on by men. As Charu Gupta shows, the construction of a Hindu nationalism was linked to the cow's body as portrayed in calendar art. This nationalism was celebrated as Hindu men protecting the cow (a symbol of the Hindu nation) from non-Hindus (like Dalits and Muslims).[538] Since the cow is associated so largely with women in its symbolism, the products of the cow are also then inevitably linked to women's roles.

A brief summary of Govardhan puja,[539] a festival celebrated especially in North India, further underscores that the products of the cow like dung are linked to women. This exploration of Govardhan puja also shows cow dung as essential to ritualistic practice. Catrien Notermans, in her extensive fieldwork in rural Rajasthan in 2019, drew attention to the Govardhan puja and its association with women in particular. Other studies on Govardhan puja describe its ritualistic functions in relation to cow dung but obscure the puja's predominant links to women and instead present it as a ritual practice by the Braj people.[540] Though Notermans acknowledges the association of the Govardhan puja with Braj, her observations underline the implications of the cow, and in turn its dung, as linked to women in India. It is also important to note here that varying rituals of Govardhan puja can be witnessed across North India, but Notermans' observations are limited to her field site in rural Udaipur. The varying nature of these rituals across North India is confirmed by Deryck Lodrick in his study of Govardhan puja in 1987. In fact, Lodrick illustrates that in areas furthest from Braj, the links of the puja to Krishna are limited and instead the puja focuses more on the dung, where 'cow-

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[538] Gupta, 'The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India', 4291–99.

[539] *Govardhan* translates to *cow nourishment*. Here it is explored in its links to ritual and women.

[540] For instance, some studies include Deryck O. Lodrick, 'Gopashtami *and* Govardhan Puja: Two Krishna Festivals of India', *Journal of Cultural Geography* 7, no. 2 (March 1987): 101–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/08873638709478510 and Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Braj, Lost and Found', *Indo-Iranian Journal* 18, no. 3/4 (1976): 195–213.

dung wealth' is seen in the etymology of the word Govardhan (or *gobar-dhan* or *dung-made*).[541]

The most famous myth associated with this puja is the story of Krishna protecting the people of Braj from torrential rains by lifting the Govardhan mountain and using the mountain as a shelter to cover the people and their cows. The puja is largely associated with this myth of Krishna, and several scholars of Braj comment on the ritual in relation to this myth. For the puja, sculptures that represent two figures are created with cow dung. It is widely thought that these sculptures resemble the Govardhan mountain, and in turn, Lord Krishna's body. Usually, once these sculptures are made, a cow is brought to bless them by essentially trampling them; this means that the cow usually steps through its own dung. The dung is then left till the full moon, after which it is gathered and scattered on the fields as manure to bring prosperity and wealth to the agricultural land. Notermans' focus on women's cow dung sculptures as 'purifiers and bringers of good luck' is useful in understanding cow dung as a purification material.[542] Notermans mentions in her ethnography that one of the villages she observes is largely Brahmin; this further reinforces the idea that the purification by cow dung is an upper caste ritual.

These links of cow dung to upper caste ritual are seen in Kain's sourcing of the dung for her work. When Kain required access to cow dung, she contacted a Hindu religious centre in Australia to see if they might be able to oblige. The requirement that the cow dung be sourced in association with India as opposed to anywhere else reiterates links of cow dung to certain cultural attributes in India. These attributes were made clear by the Hindu religious centre's instructions about the cow dung, which stated that it should only be used for an *Agni Hotra,* a

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[541] Deryck O. Lodrick, 'Gopashtami *and* Govardhan Puja: Two Krishna Festivals of India', *Journal of Cultural Geography* 7, no. 2 (March 1987): 109, https://doi.org/10.1080/08873638709478510.
[542] Notermans, 'Prayers of Cow Dung', 8.

sacred fire purification ritual chanted through verses from the Rig Veda. This response from the Hindu centre highlights that cow dung is used as a purifier by upper caste Hindu people.

The purifying nature of cow dung is also seen in other examples of contemporary Indian art. For instance, Subodh Gupta began his career using cow dung, rooting it in his personal experiences of migration from Bihar to Delhi. In his initial use of cow dung, he arranged dung cakes into a structure resembling a hut for a 1997 Khoj international workshop. In a subsequent workshop in 1999, once again at Khoj, Gupta smeared his body with cow dung in a performance titled *Pure* (see Fig.5.3). Collecting materials from his home village and burying them in a field of cow dung with the help of a woman, Gupta presents cow dung as a material important in his upbringing in Bihar. As part of the performance, he lay in this field of dung as a 'ritual of cleaning and forgetting himself'.[543] His use of cow dung presents it as religious purifier, similar to the instances of Govardhan puja and Agni Hotra. The title of Gupta's work *Pure* further underscores cow dung as a purifier. The 'pure' nature of cow dung was also recently highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic where several Indians used cow dung to purify themselves after developing the illness.[544]

The by-products of the cow, like dung, are not only considered pure but are also special and useful in their functions. These functions, like cow dung's ritualistic associations, are linked with the domestic tasks of women like cleaning and smearing of dung in houses as a cleaning ritual, and to cool and absorb evil spirits and energies in the household by the smearing of dung on the walls. Cow dung is also used as manure in the fields, and for fuel (cooking and heating) as cow dung cakes. In addition to dung, the functionality of cow milk is significant, for the milk provides nourishment for families, but also produces curd, cheese, butter, ghee and

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[543] Subodh Gupta, *Pure, a Performance*, 31 October 1999, Performance, 31 October 1999, https://khojstudios.org/project/subodh-guptas-work/.
[544] Amit Dave, 'Indian Doctors Warn against Cow Dung as COVID Cure', *Reuters*, 11 May 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indian-doctors-warn-against-cow-dung-covid-cure-2021-05-11/.

sweets. The functionality of milk in association with dung is also worth noting. Milk is used to make *panchagavya* (a mixture of curd, butter, ghee, dung and milk) which is used like cow dung as a purifier in rituals. A famous instance of the use of *panchagavya* for purification is seen in the Mahad Satyagraha, led by Dr B. R. Ambedkar to liberate Dalits from caste. The incident took place in 1927 when Ambedkar led a number of his followers to drink out of a water tank previously reserved only for upper caste people. The act of drinking water out of this tank by Dalits caused outrage among the upper castes who then tried to purify the tank by filling it with *panchagavya.* Though the drinking of this mixture effectively poisoned the upper caste people who then drank from the tank, the message was extremely clear: upper caste people would rather drink poisoned water than drink water touched by Dalits. In fact, artist Rajyashri Goody portrays this particular incident in her installation *What is the caste of water?* (2017) (see Fig.5.4) and uses the mixture of *panchagavya* in modern-day glasses to recall the discrimination faced by Ambedkar and his followers.[545] This reiterates the links between purity and the cow in terms of material, especially as a component of *panchagavya* is cow dung. In addition to its use as a purifying agent, cow dung ash is also used as a component of *vibhuti* or *sacred ash* that is smeared on foreheads or bodies of ascetics as either caste markers, or in ritual worship.[546]

Kain's use of cow dung in her work stems from its function and connotation as a purifying agent linked to ritual and religion. While the Hindu religious centre instructed that the 'religious' cow dung be used for an *Agni Hotra,* Kain instead placed the cow dung in her artworks to subvert the dung's pure and ritual nature. In this placement of dung, Kain not only

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[545] Rajyashri Goody, *What Is The Caste Of Water?*, 2017, 108 glass tumblers containing dried and diluted panchagavya (a mixture of cow dung, cow urine, milk, ghee, and curd), 2 plastic bottles with cow urine., 2017, http://www.rajyashrigoody.com/chavdar.

[546] The use of *vibhuti* as a caste marker on the forehead is clearly visible among two sects of Tamilian Brahmins, the Iyers and the Iyengars. An Iyer uses a 3-line vibhuti across their forehead while an Iyengar dons a U- or Y/V-shape vertically on their forehead.

inserts a material presence of the cow into her work, but also begins to blur the boundaries of the sacred and profane nature of cow dung using the material to highlight an aesthetic ecology.

The Sacred and the Profane

The binaries of the sacred and the profane are often set in opposition to one another, especially in the context of religion. Religion and the sacred are considered connected, while the profane is equated to the secular. Further, religion and the sacred are discussed in terms of the ritual, while the profane and the secular are talked about in relation to the state or politics.[547] Durkheim defines religion as:

> All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present a common quality: they presuppose a classification of things—real or ideal things that men represent for themselves into two classes, two opposite kinds, generally designated by two distinct terms effectively translated by the worlds profane and sacred. The division of the world into two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane, is the hallmark of religious thought.[548]

As Fitzgerald elaborates in his book, Durkheim's creation of these binaries is dependent on a Western understanding of religion where religion is largely associated with the Church. Fitzgerald refutes Durkheim's definition by showing that this definition of stark binaries only works in the Western context where the sacred and profane are discussed not only in relation to the Church, but also in the English language. In a non-European context and described by more global and regional languages, these binaries do not hold true. Additionally, Fitzgerald points toward using terms like sacred, religion, profane and the secular, as independent of one another and not interchangeably.[549]

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[547] Timothy Fitzgerald, 'Methodology 2: Religion and Secular, Sacred and Profane', in *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity*, ed. Timothy Fitzgerald (Oxford University Press, 2008), 72, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195300093.003.0003.
[548] Durkheim in Fitzgerald, 'Methodology 2', 72.
[549] Fitzgerald, 'Methodology 2'.

Like Durkheim, Mircea Eliade also described the sacred as the 'opposite of the profane' and placed both terms in direct contrast to one another.[550] Vidya Dehejia points to Stella Kramrich's description of India to refute Eliade: 'the art of India is neither religious nor secular, for the consistent fabric of Indian life was never rent by the western dichotomy of religious belief and worldly practice'.[551] Drawing from Kramrich, Dehejia goes on to describe a blur between the boundaries of the sacred and the secular or profane. Dehejia's detailed scholarship on the sacred and profane focuses on the body and its representation in stone and bronze.[552] While these representations are not relevant to this chapter, her definitions and placement of the sacred and profane as largely Western binaries is noteworthy.

It is evident that in the context of India, the ideas of the sacred and profane cannot be placed in binary opposition to one another. Rather, they have to be looked at as intersections and constantly changing presences, especially in materials like cow dung that take on varying roles as both signifiers and communicators of meaning. For instance, the intermingling of the sacred and profane can be seen in the Govardhan puja. Here, the religious is present in the cow dung sculptures made by women and further blessed by the cow. However, the same dung, once blessed, becomes manure for the field, showing the profane. Nevertheless, the dung in the field does not leave its religious nature behind, illustrating the sacred and the profane as being a continuous cycle. Additionally, in the two villages where she conducted her field work, Notermans found that this puja was a woman's 'lived religion' rather than a 'temple religion'.[553] By this, Notermans indicated that the Govardhan puja took place in the public space on village streets, rather than in private inner courtyards of homes as described by

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[550] Mircea Eliade in Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 16.
[551] Stella Kramrich in Dehejia, *The Body Adorned,* 16.
[552] Dehejia, *The Body Adorned.*
[553] Notermans, 'Prayers of Cow Dung', 6.

previous Braj scholars. This distinction between the private and the public is compelling, because it shows the fluidity between the sacred and the profane in relation to cow dung.

Kain's work, like the Govardhan puja cow dung sculptures, is an example of the intersection of the sacred and the profane. Despite Fitzgerald's insistence that words like sacred, religion, profane and the secular should not be used interchangeably, Kain's work demonstrates otherwise. As I have illustrated above, cow dung is largely seen as a sacred and religious material, yet it also carries a certain profane (but not necessarily secular) quality. In Kain's work, the use of cow dung takes on several meanings that subvert the sacred and in turn, the religious nature of the dung. The profane, though not subverted by Kain in her work, stems from her understandings of cow dung as used by women like Babytai Kamble in polishing and cleaning their houses.

The multiplicity in meaning associated with materials like cow dung is what Kain refers to as 'textures'. The materials ripple with the 'texture of stigma', the 'texture of shame', or the 'texture of passion, of sex, of joy, of grief'.[554] One must then ask what the 'texture' of cow dung in Kain's work signifies. Since *The Womb of a Jackal* and *Jina Amucha* stem from narratives and histories that are derived from familial pasts as well as literary texts, the 'texture' of cow dung in Kain's work takes on the role of a personal and collective narrative that imbues both artworks. This 'texture' then differs from the sacred and profane nature of cow dung that has been elucidated so far, placing cow dung as a material that resonates with experiences of caste. As illustrated through Kain's experience with the Hindu religious centre in Australia, cow dung is used in upper caste purification rituals like the Agni Hotra. This is mirrored in its use in Govardhan puja as well as in its use by artists like Subodh Gupta. Kain's choice in using cow dung presents a narrative that is novel, showing that the material presence of cow dung

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[554] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

lies beyond its realm of divinity. Additionally, since Kain used dung that was originally meant for purification, her novel approach to subversion is further strengthened in that she reclaimed this material as her own. Therefore, Kain's work reinforces that cow dung's profane nature parallels its religiosity.

Like the incident with the Hindu religious centre showed, cow dung is used in purification rituals like the Agni Hotra. This makes cow dung a religious material (the sacred) in addition to its functions as an everyday object (the profane). Kain's use of cow dung specifically subverts religious associations of the dung in addition to the patriarchal links it contains by using the dung as one of the significant markers of a larger story on the role of women and caste as linked to cow dung. By placing cow dung in *The Womb of the Jackal* and *Jina Amucha,* she reclaims dung as her own material and gives it new meaning in that it becomes a marker of a subversion of caste, rather than a religious material of purification.

Materials and Materiality

There are several ways in which to define and understand materials, and in turn, materiality. While the material turn in art history is grounded in interdisciplinary studies and has drawn on literature from authors like W. J. T. Mitchell, Hans Belting, Daniel Miller and Arjun Appadurai,[555] the relationship between the human and material is at the forefront of such scholarship. In other words, the connection of the material to the human, and vice versa, whether through myth, religion, ritual or other such notions, grounds this material turn in art history. Kain's use of dung also reflects a relationship between the human and the material and is foregrounded by cow dung's links to ritual practice in India. Yet Kain's use of dung is not only in terms of its relationship between the human and the material. She also focuses on the

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[555] Some considerations on the agency of images and objects can be found in Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?,* Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2005), and Arjun Appadurai, 'Mediants, Materiality, Normativity', *Public Culture* 27, no. 2 76 (May 2015): 221–37, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2841832.

material quality of cow dung as a substance—its malleability, colour and connection to her body become primary agents in understanding cow dung as a substance in her work. It is through Kain's focus on this material quality that Zitzewitz's definition of materiality becomes particularly useful where the materiality of cow dung emphasises 'the qualities and capacities of cow dung as a substance'.[556] These 'qualities and capacities' extend to understandings of cow dung in terms of its functions as well as aesthetic sensibilities.

Jane Bennett, the environmental philosopher, focuses on the experiences of materiality, and how this materiality might help engage with present ecological challenges. Her work builds on that of Bruno Latour and reflects a blurring of boundaries between subject and object.[557] The material turn has often focused on the human's interactions with 'other orders of being, including things, animals, and nature'.[558] Kain's use of cow dung highlights her interaction with other orders of being since the dung is from an animal and part of the natural world. Following Bennett, if we focus on Kain's experience of materiality with dung, we can engage with the challenges of caste, but also engage with present ecological challenges with regard to the cow since acknowledging the cow's animality through its dung is possible. Therefore, to understand the use of cow dung in Kain's work from an ecological perspective would be to highlight the dung as being from the cow. This would mean examining Kain's experience of cow dung as a substance from an animal, and subsequently placing this examination of experience within an understanding of the cow-as-animal. While Kain does not necessarily acknowledge the cow's animality, her use of cow dung as a material largely relies on its qualities and capacities which are derived from the animal. In shaping the dung on her panels or silkscreen, her portrayals depict the dung in its textural property as an organic substance.

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[556] Karin Zitzewitz, *Infrastructure and Form: The Global Networks of Indian Contemporary Art, 1991-2008* (University of California Press, 2022), 87, https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520387096.

[557] Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), xvi, in Zitzewitz, *Infrastructure and Form*, 90-91.

[558] Zitzewitz, *Infrastructure and Form*, 90.

Since Kain's work is also dependent on the ritual nature of cow dung and subverting these ritualistic links to cow dung, an amalgam of material presence is underscored: the material presence of the cow-as-animal through its dung as well as the material presence of the cow-as-image in disrupting dung's hegemonic associations.

Kain's careful selection of materials and the wide range of materials she uses is coupled with her focus on personal and collective histories that she draws from. The sourcing and handling of materials in Kain's work is significant to the way in which she reclaims materials as being her own. Since she lives in Australia, she finds a lot of her materials like sindoor and cow dung either in Indian shops or on websites. Bringing these India associated materials into her studio is relevant to the way she processes materials:

> But what reclaiming something to me means is that you take something and you break it into little parts, and you reassemble it. And I think, you know, I take this cow dung or these calf skins and, okay, so there is a clear history that comes with that, and an enormous discourse and enormous amount of violence and trauma. And then I bring it into my studio, which is always a space of potential and safety, and equality. And then I can create something of it, which is of which is often of value…because what reclaiming to me means is that you can imbue it with anything you want, you can do anything you want with it, I can do whatever I want with cow dung, I can do anything I want with these so-called holy animals with these things, it's my space now.[559]

Obtaining these materials from places (including shops) linked particularly to India suggests that Kain's process involves a destabilisation of symbolisms of material in an Indian context. The procurement of material has to be linked to India, otherwise the disruption of their meaning has no relevance.

Part of the significance of Kain's materials then lies in the very act of sourcing them and reclaiming them as her own. For instance, the location of cow dung in her work signifies the cow's material status as against the traditional history and symbolism of the cow as religious and divine. This location of material is seen in Kain's view of the cow in India which

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[559] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

'frames this whole question of caste'.[560] Through her work, Kain interrogates Dalit persecution in the name of the cow, as well as the Dalit's 'unholy' nature placed in opposition to the holy cow.[561] Using cow materials like dung in her artwork entrenches a sense of 'reclamation' where she can repurpose 'these so-called holy animals' to align with her own lived experiences and inherited narratives.

Kain takes 'materials seriously'.[562] In taking materials seriously, it becomes essential to understand Kain's use of materials as relational in terms of the multiplicity and layered meanings the materials carry. These include subverting hierarchical and hegemonic ideas of caste and patriarchy, but also looking at the establishment of Kain's relationship with materials like cow dung as a parallel for a relationship between human and cow matter. As Zitzewitz posits, 'the appeal of materiality comes in its dialectical relationship with mediation in both its subject-centered definition, as signification, and its object-centered meaning, as communication or image-making technology'.[563] It is crucial here to note the capacities of materiality in its being able to signify and communicate. In turning to the cow dung as a subject, Kain's work uses cow dung because of certain significations like its links to religion. As an object in Kain's work, cow dung then communicates specific ideas on subversions of its very significations. In this way, Kain's work, in using cow dung, ensures that its materiality 'lies in those dimensions of its experience that exceed the meanings or contexts to which it is attached'.[564] The tactility of the dung is linked to Kain's shaping of the dung as an artist, as well as the way in which we, as viewers, perceive this tactility. The material presence of cow dung is thus beyond its associations and functions, and instead understood as unique to Kain's

[560] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.
[561] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.
[562] Notermans, 'Prayers of Cow Dung', 8.
[563] Zitzewitz, *Infrastructure and Form*, 91.
[564] Zitzewitz, *Infrastructure and Form,* 92.

personal and collective narratives in relation to caste and cow dung, and the cow-as-image-animal combined.

Personal and Collective Histories

To fully understand Kain's work and its portrayal of inherited narratives of personal lived experiences and collective histories from literature, it is important to look at her context as an artist from the diaspora. In being part of the diaspora, Kain's caste experiences are different from the other three artists discussed in this thesis. In the postcolonial era, the migration and resettlement of people created new diasporic identities. Since Kain's family moved to Australia when she was just three years old, her identity as an Indian within the diaspora is important. The concept of a 'home' country is often discussed in relation to diasporic communities, and this idea of 'home' is often rooted in memory.[565] For Kain, though her idea of 'home' is Sydney where she has grown up, her links to India are 'in her body' and she expresses this in the material used in her artwork. Therefore, Kain's identity as an artist in the diaspora is embedded in personal and collective histories that are made active through materials like cow dung. In particular, her diasporic identity is linked to caste as a memory of the personal and the collective, and subsequently as a manifestation in material.

Even though Kain's life has predominantly been spent in Sydney, she was born in New Delhi. Her move to Australia when she was three years old with her family was because her father, a beneficiary of reservation, secured a job in a restaurant. While caste was not the focus of Kain's upbringing as a young child, being the 'other' was a common feeling in Kain's life, especially as an Indian living in a white neighbourhood: 'there was no understanding of being a Dalit, but there was an understanding of being the only person who was darker'.[566] This is

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[565] Amardeep Singh, 'Diaspora', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (June 2021): 61–63, https://doi.org/10.1177/09749276211029453.

[566] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

not to say that caste was not a constant presence in her life. However, conversations around caste especially transpired when Kain was slightly older and her father joined organisations and communities focused on anti-caste movements in Sydney. The feeling of hiding extended to her identity both within and outside her home where she started 'editing' herself to fit into versions that she thought other people would like to see. [567] Kain now describes this otherness as a blessing in disguise: 'so I grew up wanting to be like everyone else. And now I realised that everything that made me different is what I'm celebrating in my art'. [568] In her art, the hiding and editing of self and narratives disappears for the work honours the very identities she obscured.

I refer to Kain's biography as a signpost of the content her work grapples with. The importance in understanding her biographical details comes from the centring of personal and collective histories in her art, and their connection to the materials she chooses to use in her work. The experience of caste for an artist like Kain in the diaspora is 'fragmented' and is framed by experiences and narratives from her parents and grandparents. Kain calls the lived experiences of her parents a gateway to understanding her own broader ancestral history, especially the nuances in community and language that are particular to Kain's family. These particularities are then further experienced through the reading of literature and placed within a larger and more collective narrative of similar histories. [569]

Inheritance, as a construct, signifies a connection of human beings across generations. The idea of inheritance involves a passing on of traits and objects and is often a contentious notion because of complications regarding tradition and heritage. The way caste is kept alive in India today is largely through inheritance and endogamy; social hierarchies and power

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[567] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.
[568] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.
[569] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

relations often involve the 'othering' of those outside certain caste and class brackets. For instance, partners in inter-caste marriages are often threatened in terms of not receiving their due inheritance (largely monetary) if they marry outside their caste. Usually, these instances also involve the ostracisation from a family, wherein one or both partners are told that they no longer belong if they marry outside their caste bracket.[570] Inheritance also 'is invariably bound up in biologistic models of human reproduction, which open onto questions of genetics—and the reactionary domain of eugenics, inherited defects, degeneracy, and purification schemes—all under the name of a "naturalistic" paradigm'.[571] The 'naturalistic' paradigm reflects the way caste is understood in India as being a structure within historical terms where caste is natural and the hierarchy that exists within the social structures of caste is organic and a 'moment of creation of the universe, by and out of a sacrifice of the body of purusha, the primeval man.'[572]

Kain's 'inheritance' of caste requires to be understood within these larger frameworks, especially in relation to her material choice for her work. Since Kain has grown up in Australia, outside the Indian caste context, she talks about an 'inheritance of rage' which resulted in her seeking out what she knows to be true of caste. [573] While the lived experience might not be Kain's herself, the inheritance of the lived experience comes through in personal and collective histories. For example, she said that she saw her father watch videos of caste atrocities, and that when she watched these same videos, she had a twofold experience: first, a fairly objective experience that anybody might feel when watching violence against other human beings, but second, an experience that brought about 'a great wave of emotion and reaction' within her: 'when you watch when you enter the conversation about being a Dalit, you know that it's in you...it triggers a visceral response.'[574] This response is seen in her subversion of certain

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[570] News of issues and 'honour' killings as a result of inter-caste marriages are a daily feature in India.

[571] Étienne Balibar, 'The Genealogical Scheme: Race or Culture?' Trans-Scripts1 (2011): 2–9 in Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance,* 14.

[572] Sharma, 'The Killing of Maya in a Lake: Caste, Culture and Nature', *Marg* 71, 29.

[573] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

[574] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

materials in her work that reorient traditional and more common notions of those particular materials. This is particularly important when reflecting on caste as a naturalistic paradigm in association with the body of the primeval man. Kain's own body in shaping materials in her studio into her art pieces can be read as a reorientation of this naturalistic paradigm, wherein her body uses inherited personal and collective narratives to navigate meanings attributed to certain materials like cow dung.

Inheritance, and subsequently generation, are linked to temporality in that they are often thought of as chronological and sequential. Generation, especially, employs ideas of belonging and a shared consciousness with others from the same generation. However, Karl Mannheim rejected this linear temporality of generations, and posited that the interaction between human beings was the reason for generational existence as a social phenomenon.[575] This interaction between human beings is primary in Kain's work for her reliance on personal and collective narratives stems from an interaction with her family or an interaction with literature. While Kain's work presents a visual rendering of generational histories, it does so by foregrounding personal and collective histories as a form of collaboration. For instance, the work *Jina Amucha* was created during the Covid-19 pandemic when Kain was living with her mother. While the work first began as a result of the reading of Kamble's text, the work finally was bound to an inheritance of caste from Kain's mother when choosing materials. Using sense and touch to create this abstract landscape of Kamble's words, Kain aspired to negotiate the patriarchal through material. Since her mother was healing from both illness and the loss of her husband (Kain's father) at the time this work was created, *Jina Amucha* became about this healing and stood as an exploration of the 'compression' felt by Dalit women both externally as well as

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[575] Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations,' in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952; first published 1923), 278, in Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance*, 23-24.

within their own bodies.[576] Women of Dalit society have stood against the hierarchies of caste as well as the hierarchies of patriarchal structures; by building *Jina Amucha* layer by layer in her family garage under the watchful eye of her mother, Kain sought to understand the 'fragmented experience' of Dalit women in the diaspora.[577] The presence of Kamble's words and Kain's mother helped Kain navigate the compression and fragmented experience of Dalit women. Her inheritance of caste from a generation of women before her strived to honour women's large role in holding together Dalit communities through the use of material.

For Kain's work, David Scott's definition of generation 'as a mode of thinking the continuities and discontinuities of the past in the present' becomes significant. Generations as living simultaneously rather than in a linear sequence is important here, and Scott's idea of generation as 'a frame in which to think of the plenitude as well as the finitude of human existence' becomes a helpful point from which to look at Kain's work.[578] Rather than see Kain's work as a result of a past, it requires to be understood as being created in the present time, as a way to think of caste as a human existence that continues in contemporary society, and as drawing from a generational overlap that exists within her body. This is seen in her making of the work as a collaboration with her mother, and through her body's shaping of materials.

How can one begin to read an inheritance in Kain's work that is both personal, as tied to her familial history, and collective, as tied to her inspirations from literature and other similar areas? Turning to Edward Said here is useful; Kain's inheritance of the personal and collective can perhaps determine 'beginnings' not as an origin but in terms of a construction of meaning that relies on the imaginaries of personal and collective narratives. For Said, the distinctions

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[576] WhatsApp exchange with Kirtika Kain.
[577] WhatsApp exchange with Kirtika Kain.
[578] David Scott, 'The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,' *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (spring 2014): 157–81 in Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance*, 24.

between the ideas of filiation and affiliation are important to discuss. His notion of 'worldliness' is very much linked to these terms, particularly through his problematisation of the 'assumption of a natural continuity between one generation and the next'.[579] Kain's work seems to bridge a divide between filiation and affiliation. On the one hand, her work links to a personal history which physically manifests in her use of body to shape her materials like cow dung. On the other hand, the collective history she portrays is through a 'critical consciousness and scholarly work'.[580] In combining the two, Kain presents modes of the personal and the collective unique to her upbringing in Sydney, and underlines her places as a diasporic artist.

In addition to caste, Kain's experience of Sydney is rooted in the way Australia has been shaped by the histories and contemporary realities of coloniality and colonisation. Her experience of colonialism parallels photographer Allan deSouza:

> Born into a colony, and later living in the colonial mother country, I saw myself outside history since it never seemed to be of my making or made by anyone that seemed to resemble me. I experienced time not as a linear sequence but as fragmented, a compression of lost pasts and disputed presents . . . in attempts to invent possible futures.[581]

Similarly, colonialism for Kain tied in with race, and she constantly felt a certain 'compression' within her own body that she attempted to reconcile in her art through the shaping of materials. In fact, she described the physical act of materials on her canvases as 'transmuting trauma',[582] a trauma that she has not lived as caste, but has definitely experienced in terms of 'othering' as an Indian woman living in Sydney. It is interesting to draw parallels between Kain and deSouza in terms of their art. Gayatri Gopinath examines deSouza's diasporic identity in his work *The Lost Photographs* (2004), a series that took digitally manipulated slides of his family's experience in Kenya and made them into prints. These prints were then left around the Los

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[579] Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance*, 22.
[580] Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance*, 22.
[581] Allan DeSouza in Gayatri Gopinath, 'Archive, Affect, and the Everyday' in *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2018), 133.
[582] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author.

Angeles home of deSouza in the present, to allow for the 'detritus' of everyday life to overlay the prints. The prints, left in spaces like the bathroom, kitchen, and sink, were soon covered in blood, hair, food, and semen, with the prints almost fading to white. The offcasts of the artist's body then became a large part of the diasporic identity of his Kenyan experience of the past in the present. The materiality of deSouza's own body is then tactile in the final product that is his work.[583] In Kain's art practice, there is a shift in terms of materiality as compared to deSouza. While Kain's body plays an important role in the shaping of materials and transmuting her own trauma, the materiality of her body is not present in the final versions of her work. Instead, the material is shaped by her body, and a material presence resonates in the final work. For instance, her shaping of cow dung in both *The Womb of a Jackal* and *Jina Amucha,* results in a final material presence of the cow in her work. This material presence takes the form of a subversion of traditional associations of the dung and presents the cow as a material symbol of subversion.

Ultimately, Kirtika Kain's work stems from a personal narrative, from stories passed down through her parents, as well as a collective narrative, from incidents and stories passed down through conversation, books, essays and other media. Kain animates these caste-life narratives, whether personal or collective, and reconfigures their meaning within a visual register. This inheritance of the personal and collective are particularly important in Kain's work as an artist working in the diaspora. Kain navigates caste in her work by validating her parents' lived experiences in conjunction with the collective narratives she imbibes through literature. In expressing these narratives in her work, Kain creates a narrative of her own interpretations of personal and collective histories. Her main goal is to 'dismantle the

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[583] Gopinath, 'Archive, Affect, and the Everyday', 133-140.

reactivity' associated with caste when representing these caste-life narratives which she largely does through her subversion of materials.[584]

Comparing Sindoor and Cow Dung

The process of drawing from 'common symbols and shared public memory to critique the hegemonic order' becomes crucial to understanding Kain's practice as a derivation from personal and collective histories. [585] It is possible to argue that the materials used in Kain's work are consistent with the role of women in Indian Hindu society, similar to the way this role is defined in the Manusmriti. Particularly, the use of sindoor and cow dung reflect links to women in India. The role of cow dung in the daily lives of women has already been discussed. Even though a discussion on sindoor is beyond the scope of this chapter, the contextualisation of sindoor provides a brief example of Kain's reliance on materials as signifiers of a large social idea. For instance, sindoor is generally associated with married women in India. The groom places sindoor in the bride's hair parting as well as on her forehead as a sign that he has now taken over from the woman's father as her guardian. There are also several other aspects to sindoor other than its marital symbolism—it is sometimes used by feminists today as a way of subverting patriarchy to produce meanings of sindoor that, like Kain's use of cow dung, critique and challenge the normative place of women in Indian society.[586]

Kain's use of sindoor in her work refers to aspects of patriarchy as well as the subversion of this patriarchy. The sindoor used in *The Womb of a Jackal* visually evokes violence through its colour and texture, and also exemplifies a certain feminine sensuality. At

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[584] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author.

[585] Y S Alone, 'Excavating the History of Present: Caste as Pictorial Sign in the Works of Savi Sawarkar', in *InFlux: Contemporary Art in Asia* eds. Parul Dave Mukherji, Naman P Ahuja and Kavita Singh (Sage, 2014), 217.

[586] See Devaleena Das, "Body, Boundaries and Sindoor Feminism in India," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (November 1, 2020): 1019–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1816018 for an account of the history of sindoor, and her own coining of the term 'sindoor feminism' to show how sindoor can be used in different ways to subvert patriarchies and traditional histories.

the same time, it also reveals a subversion of patriarchy. Kain physically applies the sindoor on the disused screen, quite unlike the groom applying sindoor on a bride. Kain's physicality in applying the sindoor on this screen is a way of 'processing, of transmuting trauma' faced by women, especially Dalit women, for centuries.[587] Therefore, Kain's use of material like sindoor is key to understanding her work and its subversion of heteronormative and hegemonic ideals. This subversion is also reflected in her use of cow dung, the main focus of this chapter.

For instance, *Jina Amucha* represents 'an empire that has never been seen',[588] built by women and their work. It is a work that at one level resists traditional notions of the materials of the cow, but it is more about the implications of the material itself and the ways in which these materials come together to present this 'empire' built by Babytai Kamble, the women in her generation, and the women who inherited that generation like Kirtika Kain and her mother. The culture surrounding this work is that it exists outside protest, and the strength of the work is actually its blending of materials to achieve a balanced visuality. It is a weaving together of stories and narratives, a blending of personal and collective histories, and finally a reimagining of materials long-forgotten, reclaiming their space for what they were in their multitudes of meaning:

> Maybe the strength of *Jina Amucha*, is that it just sees, it just looks. And in this way, I hope this work just exists. And I say that is the only way of kind of talking about caste is to acknowledge all that it is, as opposed to the agenda and the uni-dimensionality of it. It's actually multifaceted and ancient…And I think and I hope the work exists in that space, of constant ideas and potential as opposed to placing it as a Dalit artist about anti-caste because that misses the specks of gold ore and it misses all that this work is, it misses the earth and the soil, it misses every story. It's like painting every Dalit as having one agenda…it's like celebrating an entire culture... And that culture can exist outside of protest.[589]

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[587] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.
[588] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author.
[589] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, April 27, 2021, transcript with author.

Kain's position that her work can exist in a culture 'outside protest' and away from 'every Dalit as having one agenda' questions the homogenisation of caste that has often taken place when discussing caste and art. Kain's art, like in the case of *Jina Amucha*, shows that caste experiences are multifaceted, and that Kain's own experience of caste is different to the other artists discussed in this thesis. Being from the diaspora, her experiences have relied on personal and collective histories and expressing these through material. Kain celebrates her experiences and challenges the singular dimension of caste that has become the common rhetoric, and shows that in her use of materials, she can honour an ancient narrative in the present day.

Materials are often repurposed as common symbols and shared public memory to critique the hegemonic order as I stated above. This is seen in the work of another Dalit artist Savi Sawarkar who uses common symbols like red vermillion or sindoor in his work on *Devdasis* or *prepubescent females offered to gods for marriage.* To repeat, sindoor is most commonly associated with married women in India and signifies chastity. However, this signification is upper caste. Among Devdasi women, for instance, the same sindoor symbolises an availability to males. Sawarkar's use of a common symbol and material like sindoor highlights the different vocabularies symbols connote depending on their contexts. Largely, the underlying and common meanings of symbols like sindoor are upper caste, and only a small number of people are aware of their other meanings. Sawarkar thus illustrates that the symbol's context and meaning in itself requires to be reoriented to include a definition and context that breaks caste barriers.[590] Of course, Kain directly uses the material but Sawarkar shows the material through his medium of drawing and painting. The implications of common symbols, however, remain the same. Kain uses these associations to critique the hegemonic order and offers new modes of conceiving sindoor and cow dung through her interpretation of personal

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[590] Alone, 'Excavating the History of Present: Caste as Pictorial Sign in the Works of Savi Sawarkar'.

and collective shared narratives and visuality. In this critique, her work does not necessarily engage in protest, but rather critiques caste in the form of dialogue. This mirrors the multifaceted nature of her work and material, which exist in a space of constant ideas and potential.

The Cow as Material Presence

It would be remiss to ignore cow dung as direct excrement or waste from an animal. Often, when artists use cow dung, the smell of the dung disappears once it is dried and moulded. The use of cow dung, after it is shaped and its smell removed, in Indian contemporary art is almost synonymous with the work of Sheela Gowda, who explicitly used cow dung in her work in the 1990s. Gowda often shaped cow dung paste into slabs with imprints of her hands and feet and arranged them as installations, like an untitled installation in Buddha Jayanti Park, to resemble votive sculptures of subaltern communities.[591] Interestingly, like Kain, Gowda also used gold leaf with cow dung; some of these votive sculptures were topped with gold leaf.

While Gowda and Kain both use the dung once it is dried, the idea of disgust is useful in terms of understanding cow dung, especially in relation to caste. For instance, in her interview, Kain compared *Jina Amucha* to the insides of a body, particularly intestines smeared on wooden panels. Bodily matter is often charged with connotations and associations of disgust and revulsion. But the root of this disgust is from an advantaged upper caste perspective, where upper castes have the privilege of avoiding bodily matter both physically and by association. This privilege is placed in a register of moral connotations which forcefully rejects bodily matter as being beneath one's dignity. Of interest in the case of *Jina Amucha* is that the visual evocation of intestines is created partially through a physical smearing of cow dung as excremental matter from an animal. However, cow dung is not associated with disgust the same

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[591] See Zitzewitz, *Infrastructure and Form,* 85-118, for a detailed discussion of Gowda's work.

way intestines are, possibly reiterating the placement of cow and associated materials within a divine realm. The meeting of a physical reaction and a mental association with revulsion results in a vocabulary of overall 'material revulsion'.[592] Moral connotations are often linked to 'material elicitors of disgust'; 'the smell of bodily putrefaction as a sign of moral corruption' is one such example.[593] If intestines elicit disgust due to their excremental nature, cow dung (as excrement itself) should be placed within the same register of disgust. *Jina Amucha* then spells out an interesting conundrum: both revulsion to the appearance of an intestine and, contrastingly, a *material attraction* to cow dung. The 'material revulsion' as well as material attraction reflect the moral connotations of caste, where the act of attraction to religious excrement and revulsion to bodily excrement are the results of upper caste privilege.[594] Furthermore, it is a historical fact that Dalits were often left to consume intestines of cows, once again reiterating the upper caste's material revulsion to bodily matter, where they refused to engage with such materials.[595]

In addition to the 'disgust' felt at engaging with animal excrement, a direct engagement with the animal is seen in Babytai Kamble's book *The Prisons we Broke*. In the book, Kain was particularly affected by Babytai Kamble's description of a buffalo sacrifice in a temple, and decided to concentrate in part on bringing Kamble's provocative visual language describing this sacrifice into her wooden panels. As described by Kamble, the buffalo's head was severed and it rolled to one side with blood flowing profusely from its body. Blood from the buffalo would be patted on the goddess for whom this sacrifice was made. The buffalo's

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[592] Joel Lee, 'Disgust and Untouchability: Towards an Affective Theory of Caste', *South Asian History and Culture* 12, no. 2–3 (3 July 2021): 314, https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2021.1878784

[593] Lee, 'Disgust and Untouchability: Towards an Affective Theory of Caste', 315

[594] See Lee, 'Disgust and Untouchability: Towards an Affective Theory of Caste', 310-327 for a detailed understanding of disgust and caste in India and how he delineates 'material revulsion' and 'material elicitors of disgust'.

[595] See Homegrown Staff, 'Dalit Identity And Food – Memories Of Trauma On A Plate', *Homegrown* (blog), 8 June 2021, https://homegrown.co.in/article/803216/dalit-identity-and-food-memories-of-trauma-on-a-plate.to understand Dalit experiences with eating intestines.

'protruding bulging eyes, the long red tongue hanging out of the mouth, the bared teeth, the four hooves jutting out from the mouth of the buffalo lying at the feet of the goddess and the red light in the temple' all implore feelings of sacrifice and blood, and of the buffalo's dark body glistening with redness. [596] The redness that permeates Kamble's written word does not translate to *Jina Amucha* which is predominantly black. Redness is instead seen in *The Womb of a Jackal,* which does not draw from the buffalo sacrifice, but instead takes inspiration from a verse of the Manusmriti. Despite a lack of redness in *Jina Amucha,* Kain's visual landscape imbues notions of the buffalo sacrifice. The layered black tints perhaps resemble buffalo skin and the red interspersed in this blackness is perhaps indicative of droplets of blood. Yet in this rendition, though Kain recalls a buffalo sacrifice, the cow-as-animal does not have a significant role. The cow dung's presence continues to subvert religious associations and instead present a scene quite in opposition to purification: an animal sacrifice. In its sacrificial interpretation, it brings together the bovine animal and its associated imagery.

While the buffalo sacrifice is not part of Kain's lived experience, through the words of Kamble it becomes an inherited collective history, relying on the physicality of Kamble's memories and subsequent narrative. This reliance on memories is explained by Kain: 'sometimes it feels like you're resolving generations of memories that you've kept within your body'.[597] Kain's resonance with these memories and narratives affirm her personal links to a collective history, and her determination in visually representing these narratives. Her use of cow dung shows that the material presence of the cow is felt strongly even in abstraction.

Conclusion

Through the two works of art, *The Womb of a Jackal* and *Jina Amucha* by Kirtika Kain, this chapter has illustrated the scope of the material presence of cow dung as being beyond the

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[596] See Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, 32-33.
[597] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

realm of divinity. The chapter has highlighted the cow's material presence from an alternative viewpoint, something outside its common associations in India. Kain's work shows that the cow (through materials like dung) represents violence when related to women's roles in society, outside of the violence surrounding meat and skin. Her work also alludes to women's strength and resilience in the wake of such violence, turning to materiality to underscore these notions. The questioning of upper caste divine associations of the cow through Kain's reclamation of cow dung's material nature is noteworthy. I would argue that reading Kain's images through her influences and histories offers new modes of conceiving materials like cow dung, both within and outside the diaspora.

The associations of women and cow dung are central to Kain's themes. A Dalit woman herself, the art she creates seems to pay homage to women like Babytai Kamble, her own mother, and those who suffered from the Manusmriti's extreme laws. Her evocation of occupation, religion, corporeality and inherited narratives through cow dung demonstrate the strength of her own intuitive links to the materials she chooses as well as the various 'textures' these materials hold. It is through these materials that a new conjuncture is created by Kain. The materials help 'transmute trauma' of caste that she has held within her body and become the site through which diasporic experiences of caste and the cow can be furthered.

Histories and narratives that are both personal and collective visually manifest on Kain's canvases, prints and panels, forming a contemporary visual archive. Her work is an archive of the past in the present, and is also in the process of being formed, therefore making it a living archive: 'the personal and the autobiographical function as modes of theorizing the archive and the relation of diasporic subjects to an elusive past'.[598] This elusive past in the case of caste comes alive through the work of artists like Kain. Her careful curation of material

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[598] Gopinath, 'Archive, Affect, and the Everyday', 133.

presence invokes a sensorial memory, speaking to an inheritance of personal and collective archives of history.

When speaking about the accessibility and reception of her art, Kain specifies that visual language often does not have the same reach or audience as words and books might have. However, she talks about 'inherited rage' being a commonality for authors and artists in the anti-caste sphere, where this rage is then transmuted as 'a very powerful force of creative expression'.[599] The span of this inheritance of narratives stretches generationally far into the past and future because it is difficult to summarise or contain within a single timeframe or movement. 'It will come generations afterwards, just as the artwork I create always feels to me like it's existed before it's been made. And it'll exist after it falls apart'.[600] The two artworks explored in this chapter are perhaps confirmations of this statement. They existed before they had been made into narratives, and their existence in the future is through the themes and messages they convey, especially using the material presence of the cow.

Kain's *The Womb of a Jackal* and *Jina Amucha* represent the cow in a visually abstract manner, focusing on the material presence of the cow and alternative perspectives from which to view the cow-as-image. We see her work understood in two ways: first, it can be perceived as a resistance to the primarily Hindu cow-as-image, and second, it can also be understood in isolation as a reclamation and celebration of a space and meaning pertaining to the cow-as-animal that has already been in place for centuries. Therefore, Kain redefines the visual vocabulary of the cow and shows that it can be repurposed and understood in terms other than divinity and holiness.

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[599] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.
[600] Kirtika Kain, interview by author, Online, March 31, 2021, transcript with author.

CONCLUSION

> The cow has never
> walked
> mooed
> or given milk
> in our house
>
> What is this debate about then?
> We will build an overbridge
> to cross the *vaitarni.*
>
> ('Overbridge' by B. N. Vankar) [601]

> 'the cow jumped over the moon'
>
> ('Hey Diddle Diddle' by Mother Goose) [602]

The cow jumped over the moon is a familiar line from the English children's nursery rhyme *Hey Diddle Diddle.* We have jumped over many moons, exploring realms of oppression in caste, its violence, artists' lived experiences and intentions, the idea of relatedness, and themes like food, labour, violence and religion, all linked by the cow, to reach this concluding section. (We are perhaps also over the moon that we are finally here.) There is one final journey to end this exploration; a final jump over the moon with the cow (and me) to conclude.

In this thesis, I have considered the extent to which artists engage with the cow's image and cow's animal nature. In doing so, I have shown that the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal have often been in binary opposition to one another. This has largely been in relation to the cow's associations with upper caste Hinduism which has resulted in caste oppression in the name of the cow (as image). The cow-as-image has been used as a justification for caste violence and manipulated in such a way that the premise of the animality of the cow—that is, that the cow is an animal—is forgotten. The four artists discussed through the case studies in

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[601] 'A Cow Worshiper's Ramrajya: Two Dalit Poems from Gujarat', *Asia Dialogue* (blog), 28 July 2017, https://theasiadialogue.com/2017/07/28/a-cow-worshipers-ramrajya-two-dalit-poems-from-gujarat/. The *vaitarni* is the River of Death. Usually, a cow leads a Brahmin across the *vaitarni.* The Dalit poet Vankar rejects this; by rejecting the cow, he rejects Hinduism.
[602] Poetry Foundation, '"Hey, Diddle, Diddle," by Mother Goose', Poetry Foundation, 20 June 2023, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46952/hey-diddle-diddle.

the thesis have disrupted the cow-as-image in its associations with hegemonic caste perpetrations and instead, presented a new understanding of the cow as removed from this hegemony. Throughout this thesis, I have shown that there requires to be a consideration for a space where the voice of the artists, the relatedness of human and cow, and the nuances of caste come together to present the possibility of an amalgamation of the cow-as-image and cow-as-animal.

In Chapter One, I approached an understanding of the concept of the cow using two strands: the cow-as-image and the cow-as-animal. By tracing a brief history of the cow in India, it became clear that the cow-as-image had dominated the cow-as-animal and stood as the foundation for many systems of oppression and social hierarchy. Particularly, the calendar prints of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were shown to be instrumental in helping circulate the cow-as-image. Moreover, this circulation of prints that targeted communities like Dalits and Muslims aided in perpetrating violence against them (though in this thesis, I concentrated on the violence against Dalits). Additionally, this understanding of the cow-as-image was largely within a framework of protected ignorance, where only upper caste understandings of the cow permeated the Indian cultural landscape.

The case studies approach central to the thesis extended across Chapters Two to Five. The first artist studied in detail was G. Chandrasekaran in Chapter Two. In this chapter, I looked at four of his painted and sketched renditions of the cow: *Stitched-up Kamadhenu, Triptych, Matchbox Kamadhenu and Glassbox Kamadhenu.* The chapter showed how Chandru mediated the cow's image and animal nature, intending to highlight that the cow is an animal over and beyond its image. In keeping with an approach that combines caste studies and animal studies, the chapter examined Chandru's work in relation to the commodification of the cow-as-religion (especially Kamadhenu) and the cow-as-animal in terms of Chandru's relatedness to the cow.

The thesis moved from Chandru's painted cow to the performative cow of Sajan Mani in Chapter Three. Through an examination of three of Mani's performances, *Beef Project, #MakeInIndia,* and *Art will never die, but COW?* the thesis viewed Mani's performances as within a particular context of caste in Kerala (especially labour) as well as a broader context of caste in India in terms of food discrimination and upper caste art spaces. Mani's embodiment of the cow was approached and considered within the context of a human embodying the behaviour of an animal like the cow. Mani's work highlighted that the cow presented a unique visuality with which to approach themes of caste and the idea of the animal together.

In Chapter Four, I moved from performance to the digital space through an analysis of the work of Siddhesh Gautam. The work by Gautam examined in this thesis was largely a response to current events that involved the cow. In two works, *Cow Raj* and *Gauraksha,* he reacted to the numerous lynching and flogging incidents that take place across India in the name of the cow. In *'King' makers,* Gautam looked at capitalism and its impact on the environment, attempting to illuminate that cows are constantly dying due to waste produced from within this capitalistic sphere. Gautam's images highlighted the contentious nature of cow politics in India today, both in terms of violence against the human (lynching and flogging) and violence against the animal (cow's dying from eating plastic). The presence of his images on digital platforms like Instagram help circulate ideas where image and animal can come together.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I looked at the work of Kirtika Kain who is based in Sydney, Australia, and situated her work within a diasporic context. Kain's work was perhaps the only work in this thesis that did not directly present the figure of the cow in any way, but instead illuminated the presence of the cow through material (cow dung). Kain's personal and collective inherited histories served as an important foundation with which to approach her artwork. Since her experience of caste was not direct (as she did not grow up in India), the

relatedness of herself to the cow was in its material. Cow dung is usually used in purification for upper caste Hindu rituals; Kain disrupts this religious nature of cow dung and displays it as embodying a material presence of the cow that is conceived through her body.

The 'new conjuncture' presented by the four artists discussed in the thesis, G. Chandru, Sajan Mani, Siddhesh Gautam, and Kirtika Kain has shown the intersections of caste, religion and animal studies as frameworks to approach works of art that use the animal as image. Chandru's work has shown that the cow is placed within the bounds of divinity, even when an attempt by the artist to highlight animality is the main intent behind the work. Mani, in his embodiment of the cow in his performances, has actively performed as the cow and imitated the cow's behaviour. He has taken ownership of contentious issues like food and labour in relation to caste, and disrupted the hegemonic approaches that usually pervade these spaces. Gautam's use of irony and satire in the digital space has helped disrupt normative ideas through widespread circulation of his images. Gautam has shown both caste oppression and a concern for the welfare of the cow in his work, highlighting that the animal nature of the cow can be addressed by artists, though again, his three images carry an anthropocentric bias. Finally, Kain has shown an experience of caste in the diaspora. Her life narratives on caste are inherited experiences stemming from both personal and collective histories. Using the material cow dung, Kain disrupts cow dung's upper caste associations and reclaims it as her own. Ultimately, the cow, as a unique mode of visuality, is also a new conjuncture in that it is a site for intervention: it is only through the cow, as animal, divine, mother, and image, that these discussions on caste and its themes can be thought through; no other animal in India would have the same bearing.

To approach these four artists and their work has been challenging due to the limited availability of scholarship on both art in relation to caste, as well as art as linked to the animal in the context of India. Caste tends to be made invisible in art discourse. As I mentioned in the

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Introduction, Gary Tartakov and Deeptha Achar pointed to this invisibility and argued for a category of Dalit art. However, the artists' views on not being solely linked to the category of Dalit art have driven the way I have situated their work within the broader framework of caste and art; but I acknowledge that the category of 'Dalit art' has fueled the reception and circulation of their work. A sense of criticality has also been employed in that I moved beyond the artist's voice and intent, using it as a foundation but also using clues and markers from their interviews to present a comprehensive and succinct account that acknowledged their own declarations, but also remained (slightly) objective. The relatedness of the artist and the cow has been at the forefront of my examinations, for I have realised that the relatedness embodied in India between human and cow is the reason for the artists having chosen to represent the cow in the first place. Additionally, a bringing together of the scholarship on caste studies and animal studies in India has been crucial to an overall understanding of the potential of this field. The four case studies have also shown the significance and weight of the artist's medium. Whether it be painting/sketching, performance, digital art, or material, the communication of the artist's intent through their particular chosen medium has resulted in varying outlooks on the cow.

Finally, and especially in the work with Kirtika Kain, these case studies have illuminated that an approach allowing for collaboration and shared dialogue is effective when examining sensitive and contentious issues like caste. Such an approach highlights the pedagogical role that art has in society today. I use the words 'collaboration' and 'shared dialogue' here to insist on there being an alliance between artist and person writing about the artwork. This suggests an ongoing dialogue and remains a very crucial part of writing about art, especially when writing about the work of living artists. A space like this also allows for opinions to form and grow, thus illuminating a learning on my part as art historian, especially in light of the protected ignorance that permeates the understanding on caste.

By using an approach that has considered the artworks by these artists within a framework of caste studies *and* animal studies, I have shown that it is possible for art history to bring together productively two ostensibly opposing binaries. These binaries, placed together in an analytical borderland, have helped understand that the artworks disrupt caste hegemony, but also establish the presence of the animal nature of the cow. In establishing the cow-as-animal, there emerges at least a possibility of dismantling caste oppression in the name of the cow, because the oppression has always taken place in the name of the cow *as image*. If the cow *as animal* is acknowledged, and it is recalled that the cow is, above all, a sentient being, perhaps these atrocities would reduce. In other words, the bringing together of social hierarchies and aesthetic ecologies is significant to the disruption of systems of oppression.

The scholarship in this thesis has been limited to the study of art in relation to the cow, and issues that surround this relationship. Furthermore, it has focused on hierarchical caste oppression in the name of the cow. The methods and approaches outlined here could be extended to other areas of art history and the animal in India, since a paucity of scholarship exists in this emerging field. The ways in which to consider systems of oppression together with respect to other animals in India might be a first step in expanding this field. Additionally, there is scope for further study on the cow in relation to other themes in caste like endogamy, as well as other approaches that employ a feminist outlook or include queer ecologies. Moreover, portrayals of the cow like those of Manjit Bawa or the paintings of the Nathdwara School (both of which are more conventional as compared to the four artists looked at in this thesis) could be examined critically and looked at from an animal studies perspective and a caste studies outlook.

The visual evocations art provokes are colossal. In societies like India where Dalits face distress and oppression in dehumanising ways on a daily basis, romantic notions of art as a site of resistance and redemption may seem problematic. Yet a push toward a more ethnographic

understanding in art historical scholarship, where there is value in conversation with living artists, is perhaps most important in the context of art writing in contemporary society. The understanding of the role art has to play as a tool of and for survival, and of and for pedagogy, remains crucial as well as timeless, and draws from this ethnographic approach. For me, I have learnt through the art I have examined, and it is in my learning from art that I have seen power, joy, history, violence, and beauty unfold together.

FIGURES

Figure 0.1: Siddhartha Kararwal, *Bovine Divine*, 2015. Styrofoam Installation. Jaipur Art Summit.
(Scroll.in)

Figure 0.2: Siddhartha Kararwal, Garlanded *Bovine Divine* after being taken down, 2015. Styrofoam
Installation. Jaipur Art Summit. (Scroll.in)

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Figure 1.1: Marundeeswarar Kovil, Kamadhenu Painting on Temple Ceiling. Chennai, Tamil Nadu. (Photograph by Author)
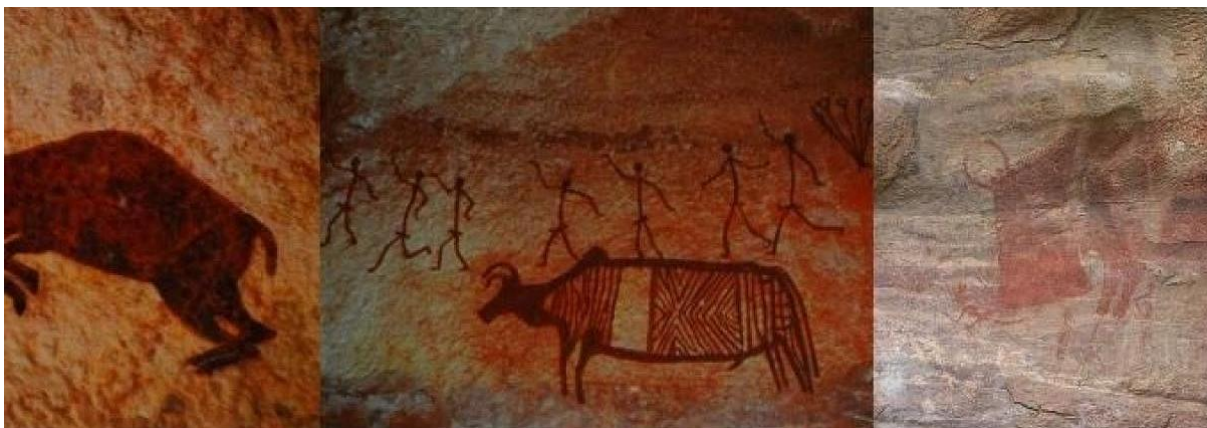
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Figure 1.5: *Picchwai for the Festival of Cows,* late 18th century. Deccan, India. Painted textile. 248 x 262 cm. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
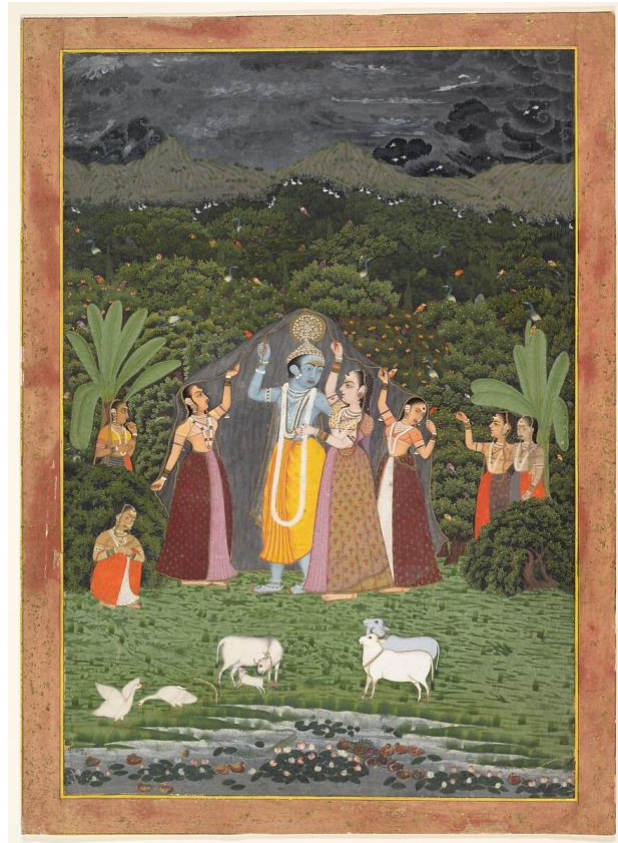
Figure 1.6: *Krishna and the Gopis take shelter from the Rain,* 1760. Rajasthan, India. Ink, opaque watercolour, and gold on paper. 34.9 x 23.8 cm. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Figure 1.7: *Krishna lifting up Mount Govardhan,* c.1690. Bikaner, India. Gouache painting on paper.

29.70 x 38 cm. (The British Museum)

Figure 1.8: Manjit Bawa, *Untitled,* 1990. Oil on canvas. 175.26 x 232.41 cm.
(Delhi Art Gallery or DAG)
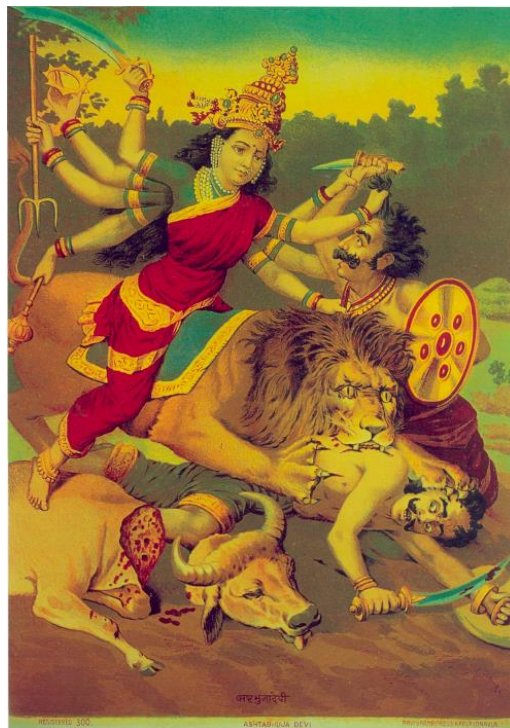
Figure 1.9: Ravi Varma Press, *Ashtabhuja Devi*. Chromolithograph.
(Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*)
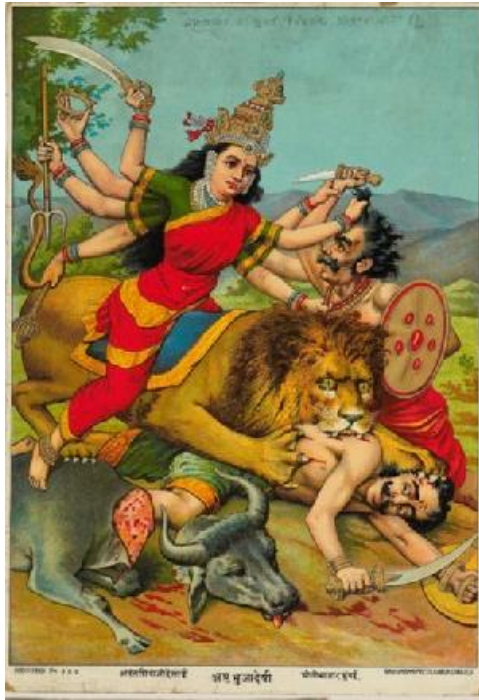
Figure 1.10: Ravi Varma Press, revised *Ashtabhuja Devi*. Chromolithograph. 36 x 25 cm.

(Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)
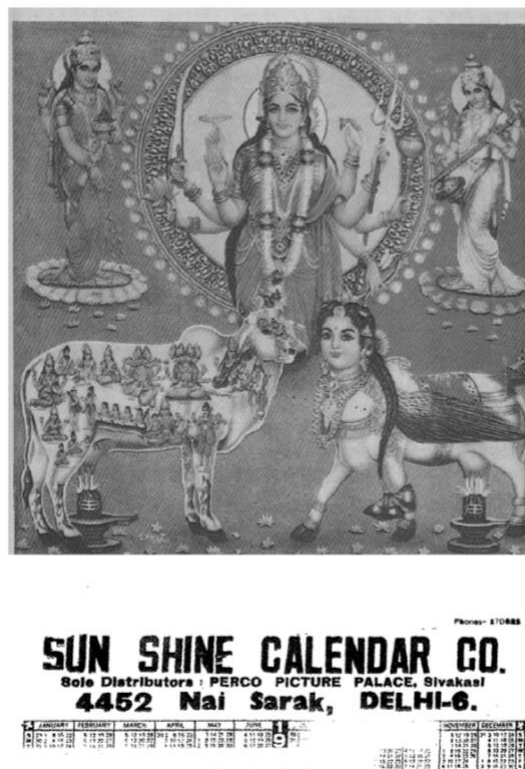
Figure 1.11: *Five Forms of the Female Deity*, *Sun Shine Calendar Co.,* 1978. Delhi.

(Patricia Uberoi, *Unity in Diversity*)
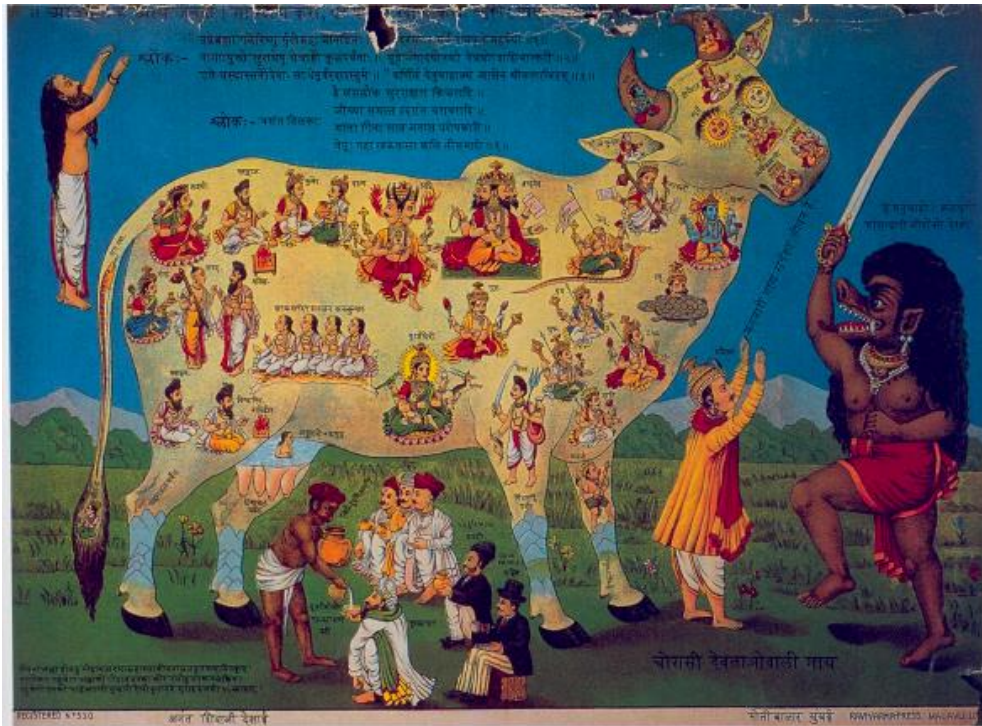
Figure 1.12: Ravi Varma Press, *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay (The Cow with 84 Deities),* c.1912. Chromolithograph. 29 x 35 cm. (Wikimedia Commons)
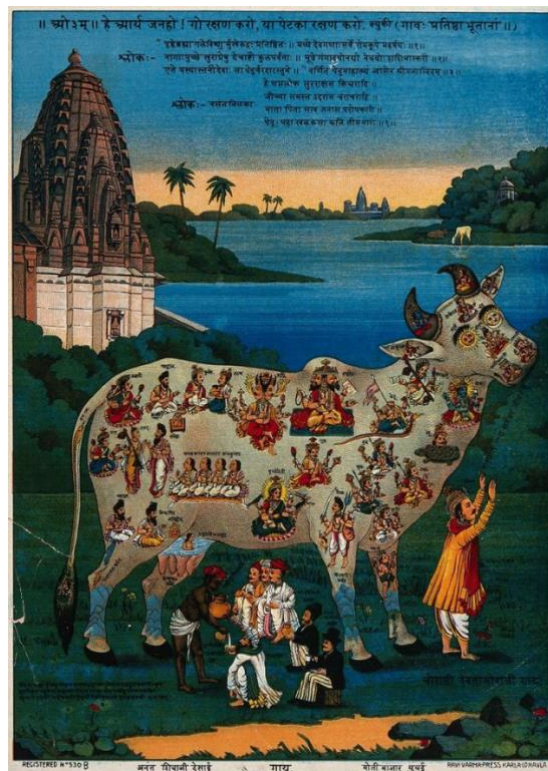
Figure 1.13: Revised print of *Chaurasi Devata Auvali Gay (The Cow with 84 Deities).* Chromolithograph. (Wellcome Collection)
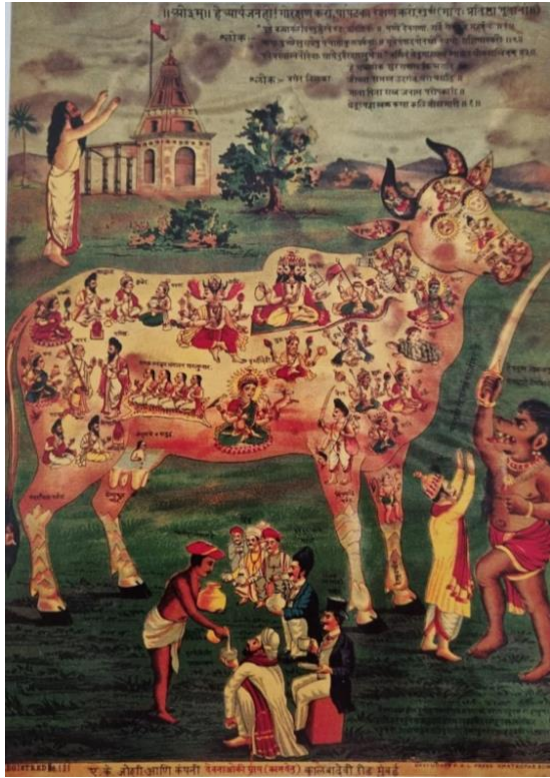
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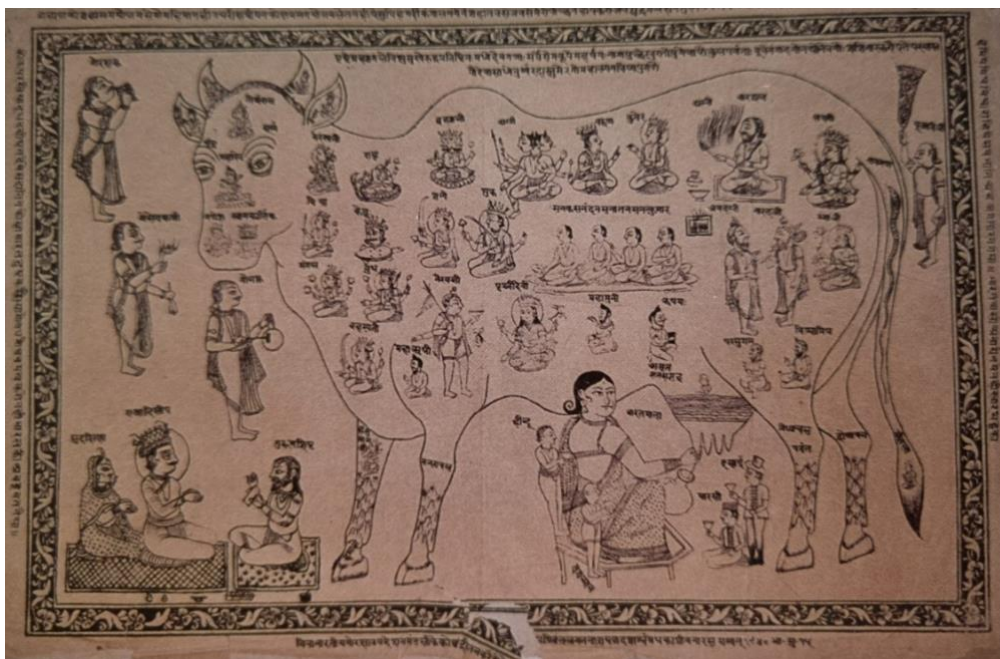
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Figure 1.16: *Jagat Mata Go-Laxmi (World Mother Cow of Good Fortune),* 1885. Lithograph, watercolour (hand-colouring), selectively applied glaze. 30.5 × 40.6 cm. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
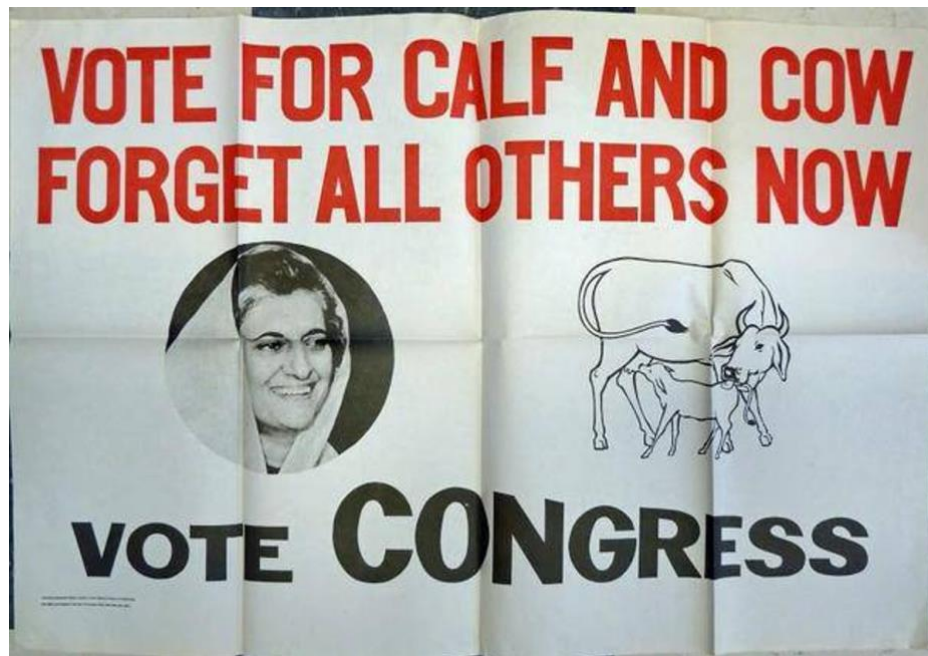
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Figure 1.21: Savindra Sawarkar, *Untouchable with Dead Cow I,* n.d. (Photo courtesy of the artist)

Savindra Sawarkar, *Untouchable with Dead Cow II,* n.d. (Photo courtesy of the artist)
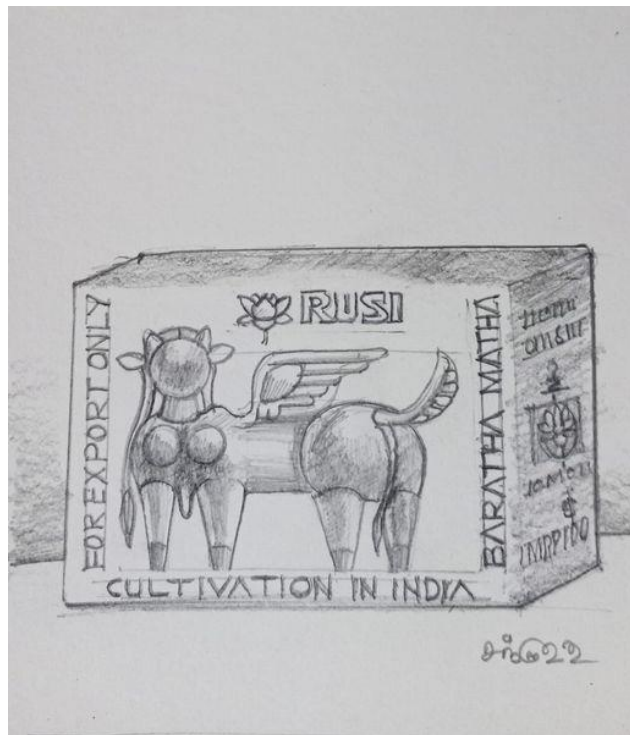
G Chandru, *Matchbox Kamadhenu*, 2022. Pencil sketch on paper.

(Photo courtesy of the artist)
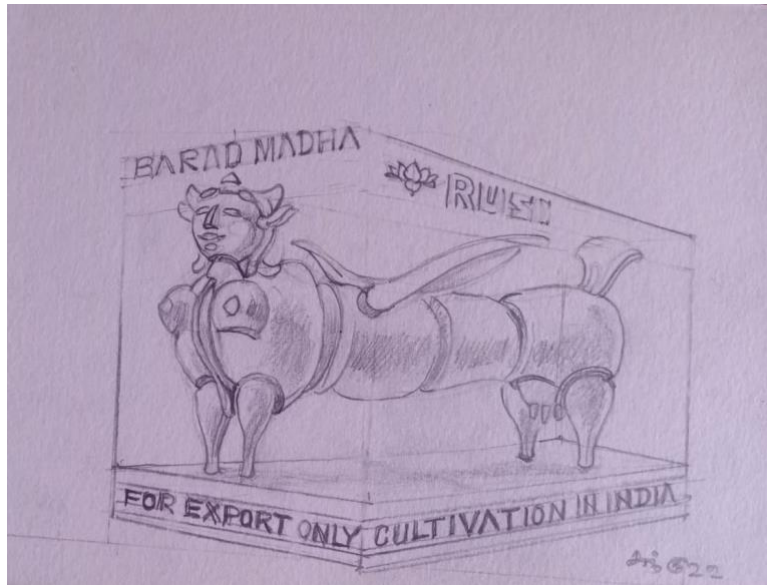
Figure 2.2: G Chandru, *Glassbox Kamadhenu*, 2022. Pencil sketch on paper.

(Photo courtesy of the artist)
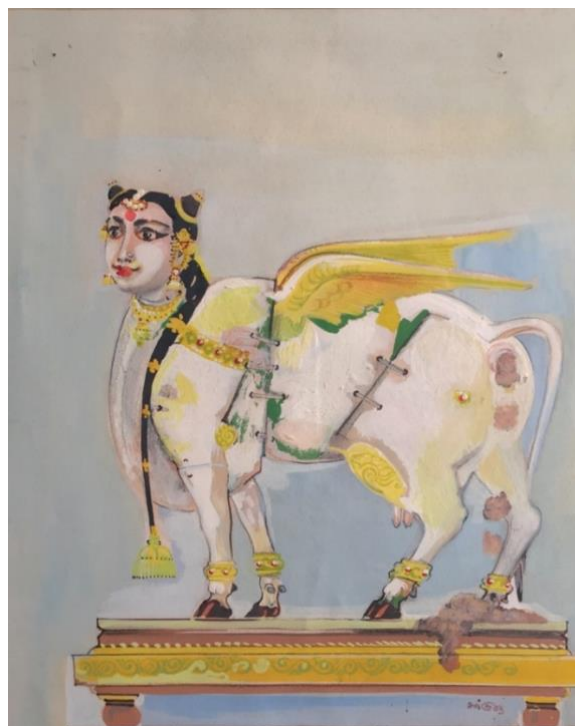
Figure 2.3: G Chandru, *Stitched-up Kamadhenu*, 2003. Watercolour on paper. (The Caravan)
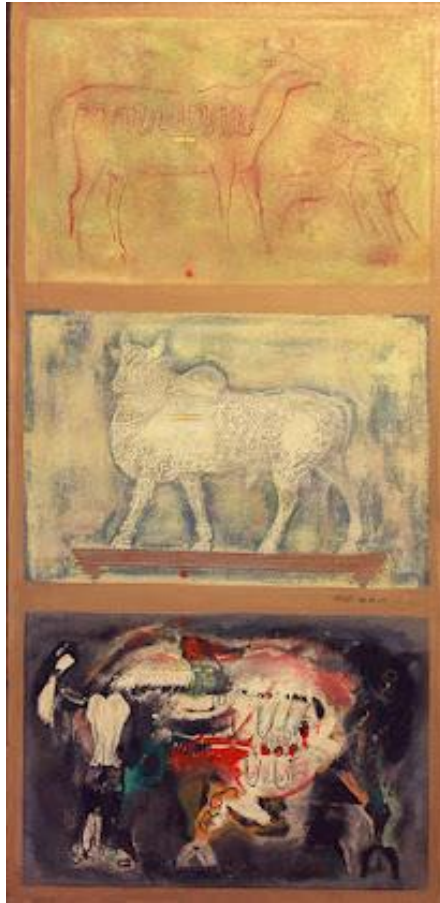
Figure 2.4: G Chandru, *Triptych*, 2001. Watercolour on paper. (The Caravan)

Figure 2.5: Jaisingh Nageswaran, Still from *Down by the Mullaperiyar* series, Ongoing. Photograph.
(Photo courtesy of the artist)

Figure 2.6: K Muralidharan, *Kamadhenu,* 1984. Acrylic on canvas. (Sahapedia)
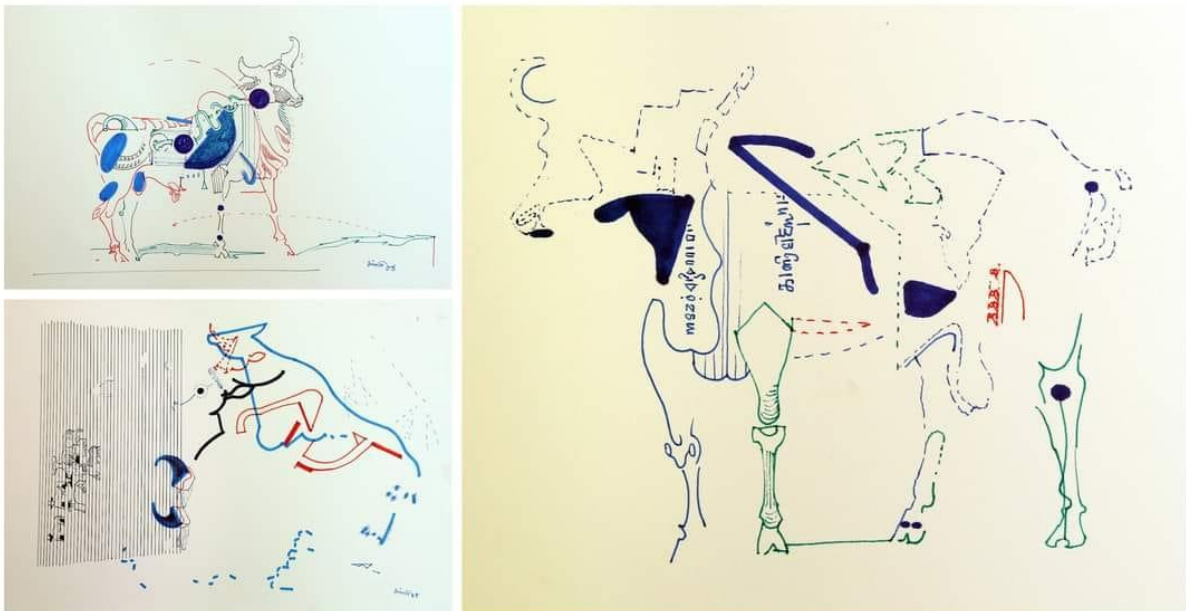
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Figure 3.1: Sajan Mani, *Alphabet of touch><Overstretched Bodies and Muted Howls for Songs,* 2020.
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Figure 3.2: Sajan Mani, *Beef Project*, 2015. Performance still. Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai Gallery Weekend.

(Photo courtesy of Mort Chatterjee)

Figure 3.3: Sajan Mani, Preparation for *Beef Project*, 2015. Chatterjee & Lal, Mumbai Gallery Weekend.

(Photo courtesy of Mort Chatterjee)

Figure 3.4: Sajan Mani, *#MakeInIndia*, 2016. Performance still. Dhaka Art Summit.
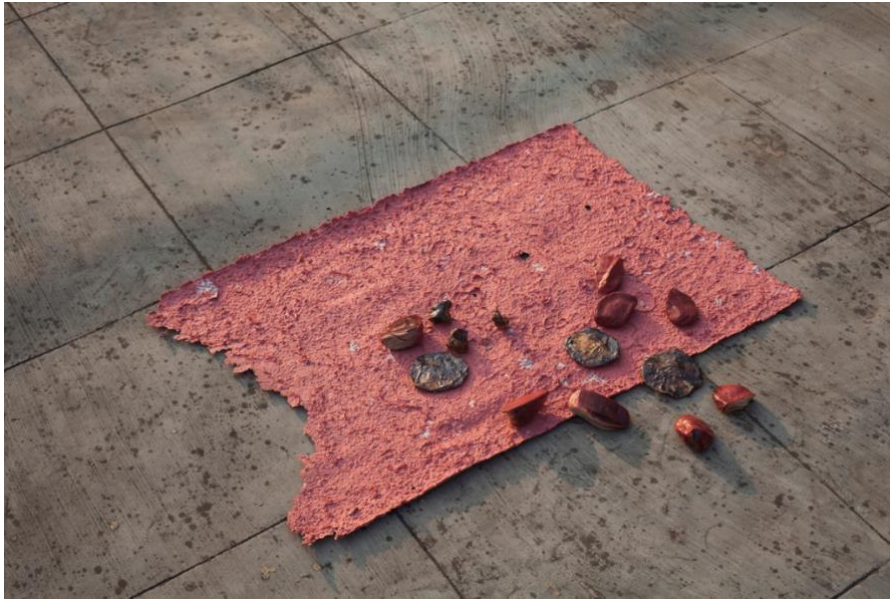
(Photo courtesy of the artist)
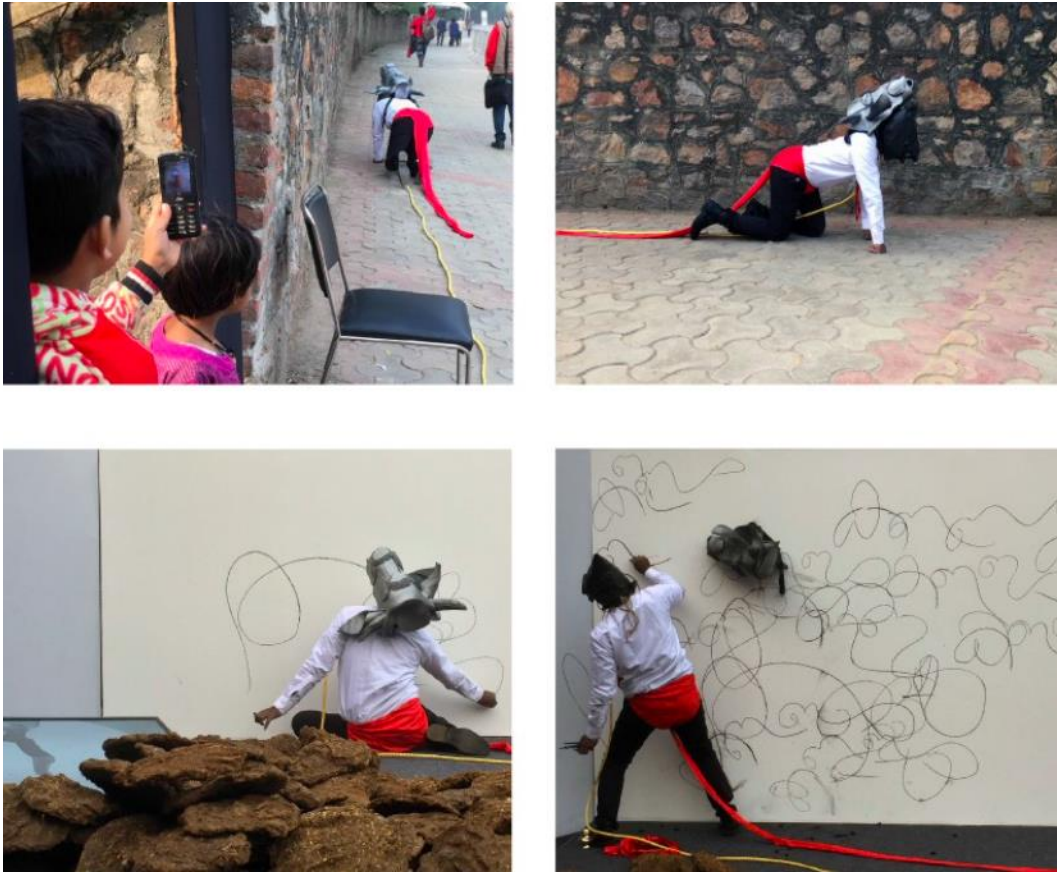
Figure 3.5: Sajan Mani, *Art will never die, but COW?,* 2019. Performance stills. India Art Fair.

(Photo courtesy of the artist)

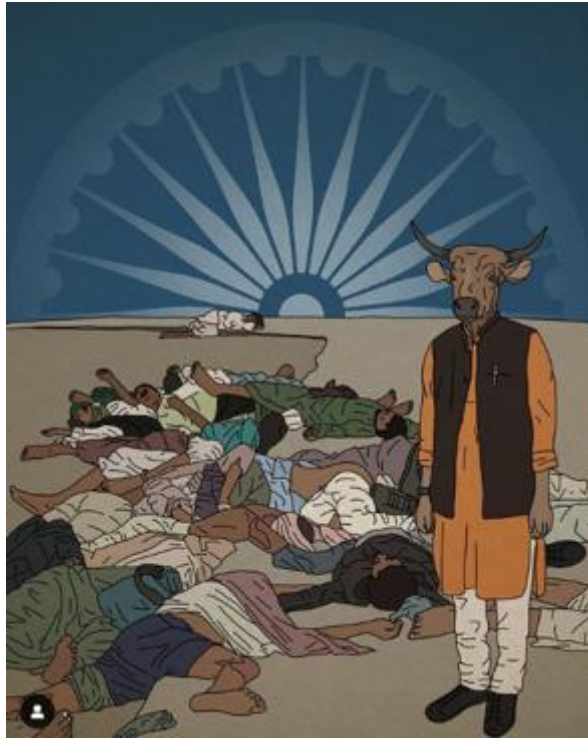Figure 3.6: Sajan Mani, *Art will never die, but COW?,* 2022. Video installation still. Verge Gallery, Sydney.

(Photo courtesy of the artist)

Figure 3.7: Rajyashri Goody, *Lal Bhaaji,* 2019. Manusmriti pulp, cermaics. Pune, India.

(Photo from artist's website)

Figure 3.8: Punnapra Vayalar Memorial, Kerala. (Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 4.1: Siddhesh Gautam, *Cow Raj, India,* 2020. Digital illustration. (Instagram)

Figure 4.2: Siddhesh Gautam, *Gauraksha*, 2021. Digital illustration. (Instagram)

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Figure 4.4: Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, photographed at a public event. (BBC)
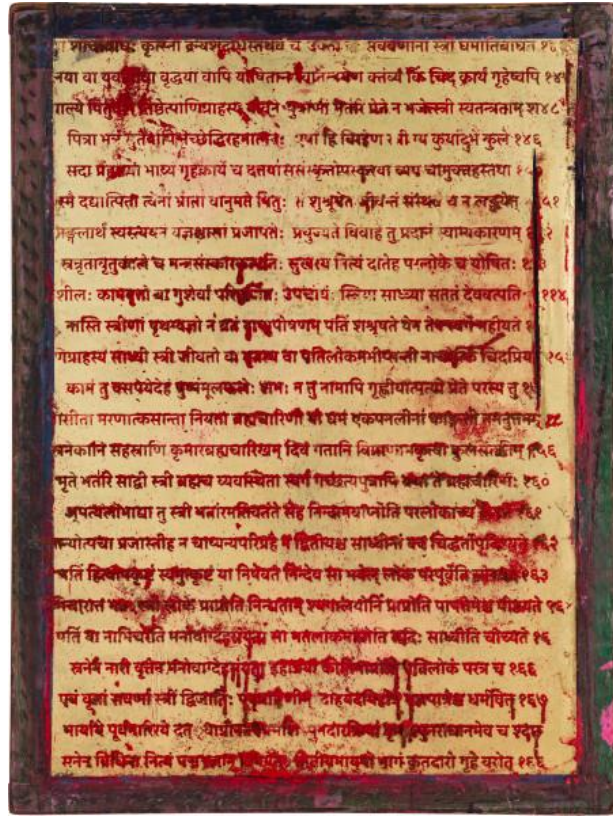
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Figure 5.1: Kirtika Kain, *The Womb of a Jackal*, 2020. Genuine vermillion and sindoor pigment, crushed cow dung on disused silk screen. 105 x 69 cm.

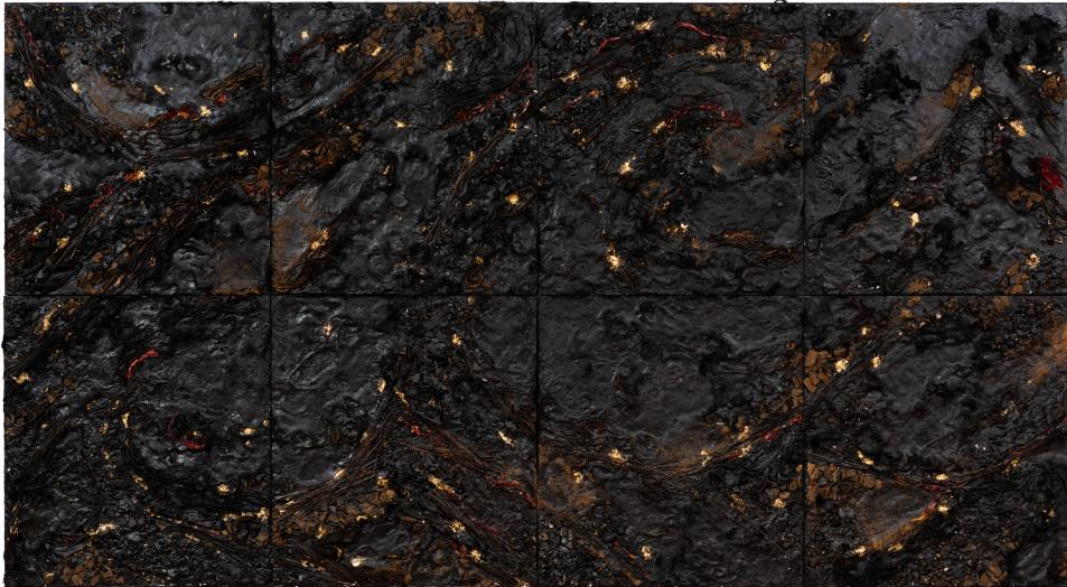(Photo courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, photo by Luis Power)

Figure 5.2: Kirtika Kain, *Jina Amucha*, 2020. Beeswax, charcoal, coconut husk, rope, gold leaf, plaster, cow dung, Indian cotton, tar, coconut broom grass, religious thread, human hair. 8 panels, each 110 x 100cm.

(Photo courtesy of Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, photo by Luis Power)

Subodh Gupta, *Pure, a performance*, 1999. Khoj, New Delhi. (Khoj)

Rajyashri Goody, *What is the Caste of Water?,* 2017. 108 glass tumblers containing dried and diluted panchagavya (a mixture of cow dung, cow urine, milk, ghee, and curd), 2 plastic bottles with cow urine. (Photo from artist's website)

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