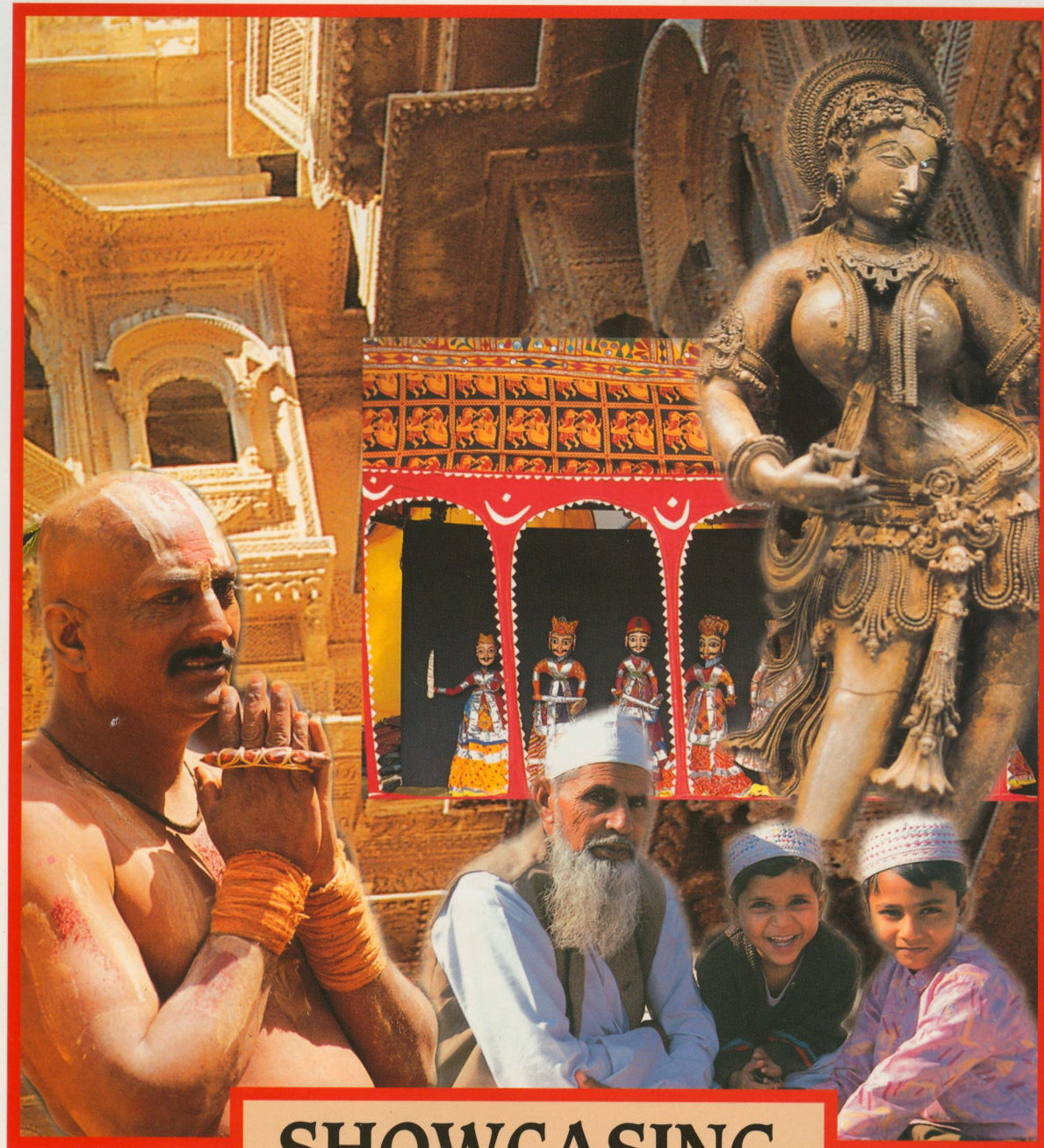


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3 Contents

4 Editorial

6 Colva A day on the Beach

TEXT: GRAHAM LANGLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY IMAGETEXT

12 The Gentle Cow

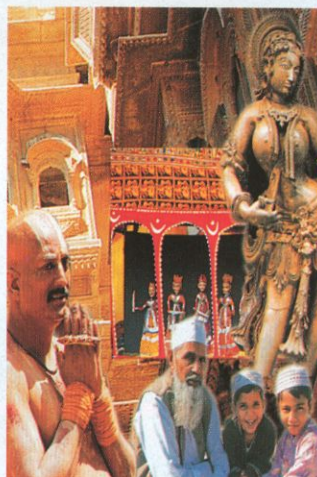
TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: NIHAL MATHUR

17 The Aqua System of Bygone Days

TEXT: SOUMITRA BASU

20 The Business Woman Traveller

TEXT: KIRTI KAPOOR



52 Shaping Unique Artefacts

TEXT: SOMNATH SARKAR

PHOTOGRAPHS: V. MEERA & VIJAYA SETH

56 Book Bazaar

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: MANISH PANT

59 A River Runners Pilgrimage

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: VAIBHAV KALA

64 Omkareshwar Abode of Shiva

TEXT: RAGHAV CHANDRA

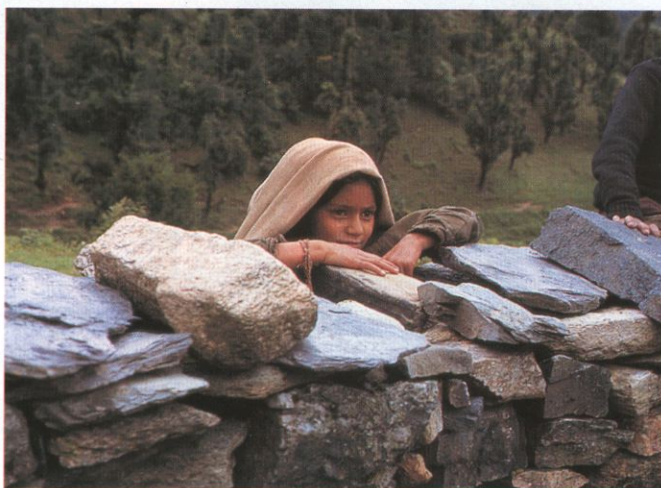
PHOTOGRAPHS: TEJ NARAYAN

68 Kalagarh Quiet Gateway to Corbett

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: RANJIT LAL

72 The Road to Uttara Kannada

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: MANISH PANT



23 Goan Pot Pourri

TEXT: ASHOK PANT,

PHOTOGRAPHS: PALLEE

26 India's Textile Riches

TEXT: MEHER CASTELINO

30 A Tribe of Shepherds

TEXT: PRATIBHA NATH

PHOTOGRAPHS: PRADEEP CHAMARIA

33 Mailbox

34 Indo File

35 World Heritage Sites

TEXT: ELIZABETH ACHAR

41 Reborn as Gandhi

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: HILMAR KONIG

44 So the Sages Said

TEXT: A. VIDYA

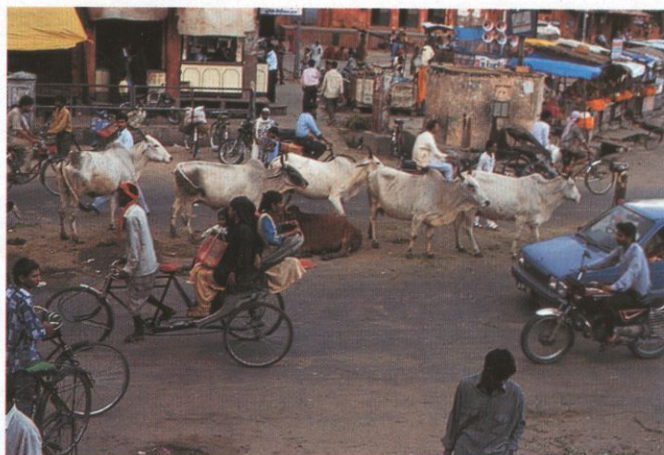
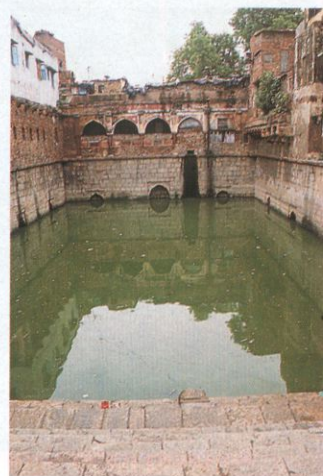
ILLUSTRATIONS: A.V. PRASANTH

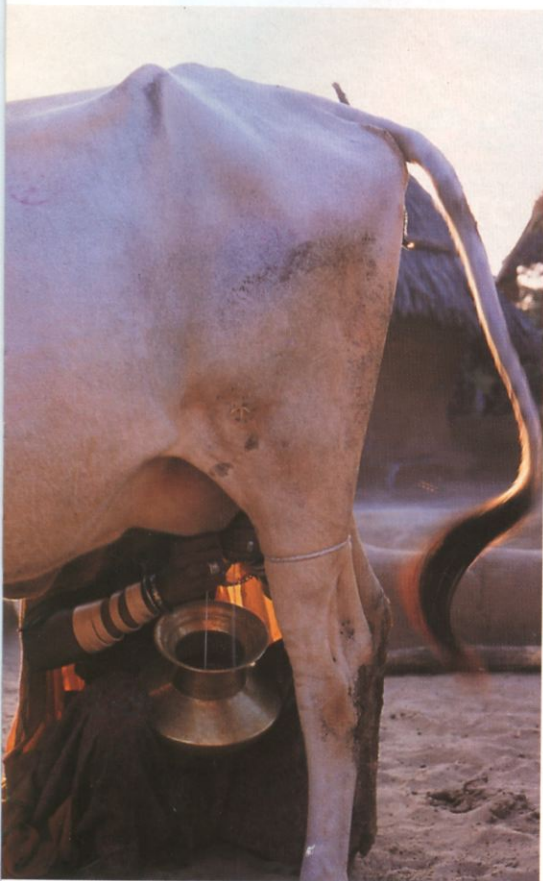
46 Tamil Nadu: Classical Grace

47 Pancheshwar: Khichri and Ash Baked Potatoes

TEXT: DILEEP PRAKASH

PHOTOGRAPHS: AMIT PASRICHA





The Gentle COW

Text and Photographs: Nihal Mathur

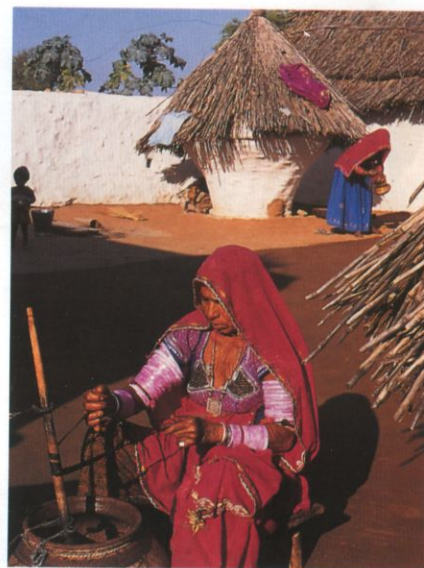
Cows in the streets of India is a reality that most Indians accept as

“the suchness of things.”

But to a set of foreign eyes, this is absolutely

unacceptable. How come if the cow is so sacred in India, it is allowed to wander the streets and feed on the garbage, they want to know. Or they often

ask, how can it be a divine creature if it is treated so shabbily by those who consider it holy?



Left: A woman milking the cow in the desert region of Marwar. The local breed of cows are prized more for the quality than quantity of milk

Right: A Bishnoi woman churns yoghurt to make butter. Behind is a grain storage earthen pot plastered with cow dung and cow urine known for its anti bacterial and anti insect properties

The sanctity of the cow is perhaps the foremost sentiment of Hindus for whom this sacred animal has far deeper nuances in Indian culture and ethos than is generally understood. For instance, in Sanskrit, the vocabulary used to mention the cow is indeed staggering, revealing the extraordinary importance that was once attached to it.

Indian scriptures tell us that the cow is a gift of the gods to the human race. It is a celestial being born of the churning of the cosmic ocean. *Gai* as the cow is called in Hindi, is symbolic of Earth itself (similar to *Gaia*, the Greek goddess of earth). It follows that the cow represents the Divine Mother that sustains all human beings and brings them up as her very own offspring. Much as a mother shows the highest mark of affection for her young, the passion of the cow for her calf is just as legendary and often referred to in Indian

literature. The ancient texts describe how the gods run to the succour of a devotee like a cow hastening to feed her calf. In fact, the cow is even more than a mother in the sense that it fulfills all the needs of her children as well. It is in this conception that the cow is understood as *Kakadheni*, the wish-fulfilling mythical cow, abode of the 330 million Indian gods and goddesses.

But in Indian mythology and legend, it is with the cult of Krishna that the cow is closely connected. Among other deeds, Krishna is said to have lifted mount Govardhan to protect his group of cows, cowboys and milkmaids. In popular imagination it is Lord Krishna who symbolizes the relationship man should have for the cow. Hence to take care of this innocent and self-sacrificing animal is a matter of virtue for Hindus who identify the act as *dharma* or moral duty.

Considerations of conscience aside, it was natural that in a predominantly agricultural and pastoral country like India, cows were and to some extent still are, considered to be the real wealth of the people. After all it is the cow that gives birth to the bulls, bulls that are harnessed to plough the fields and to provide transportation. And then of course, there is the milk — milk that is cultured to become yoghurt — yoghurt which is churned to produce butter —

butter which is converted into *ghee* or clarified butter that in India is used as cooking medium. In addition to this, there is *paneer* or cottage cheese and buttermilk. Indians cannot forget *khoya* and *mava* — the other milk derivatives used in preparation of sweets. No wonder the cow is considered the backbone of rural society.

Paeans of praise is reserved for cow's milk and *ghee* which is considered to be an elixir. Dr. D. Bhandari, the former Director of Animal Husbandry in Rajasthan said, "You see it is the wonderful bacterial flora of the cow's stomach that imparts this matchless quality to its milk ideally balanced for humans. Buffalo milk may be richer but it is cow's milk that sharpens



Above: Wife pours ghee on to a millet roti or unleavened bread held out by the husband. In the background are cow dung cakes used as fuel for cooking fires. Below: Cows have direct economic significance in an agricultural country like India as it is the cows that give birth to the bulls that are used to plough the land. Here a stud bull looks out of its enclosure

intellect, gives swiftness of body, stability of emotions and a serene nature to the one who drinks it."

Also taken, but in measured quantities, is cow urine or *gau mutra* which has a unique place in Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine. Commenting on the chemistry of *gau*

mutra, Dr. C.H.S. Sastry, Director of the National Institute of Ayurveda said, "Cow urine is used to produce a whole range of ayurvedic drugs, especially to treat skin diseases like eczema." Besides, *gau mutra* is a well known disinfectant. Anti-septic property is also the attribute of cow dung or *gobar* which is mixed with clay to form a plastering medium for mud huts. It is a proven fact that mud huts plastered with *gobar* keeps

insects and reptiles away. This is the reason why people in the countryside still store grain in huge earthen pots plastered with *gobar* and *gau mutra* to keep it free from insect manifestations.

Gobar and *gau mutra* is also mixed with mud and straw to make dried cakes that fuel kitchen fires. Traditional





wisdom says that in burning these cow dung cakes, the temperature never rises beyond a certain point, ensuring the nutrients in the food are not destroyed by overheating. Besides, the smoke of *gobar* clears the air of germs. *Gobar* has also been successfully used to produce bio-gas and generate electricity for consumer use. Scientific studies show that *gobar* has been found to be resistant to solar radiation. And of course, *gobar* mixed with *gau mutra* makes for excellent manure and a natural pesticide. Modern day ecologists are saying that as compared to chemical fertilizer which damages the land in the long run, *gobar* actually improves the health of the soil. It isn't hard to see why Indian mythology says that Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, resides in cow's *gobar*.

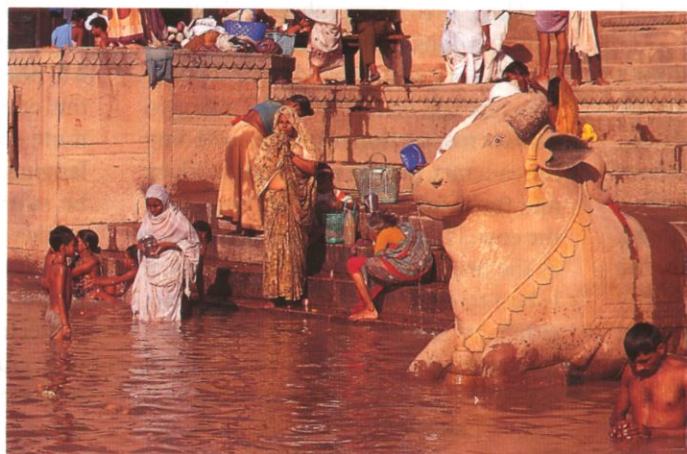
Usefulness of the cow forms the subject matter of an essay every child in India gets to write in primary school. The children are told that even in dying, the cow gives us its hide which is prized for its softness. Besides the leather, the cow also gives its horns

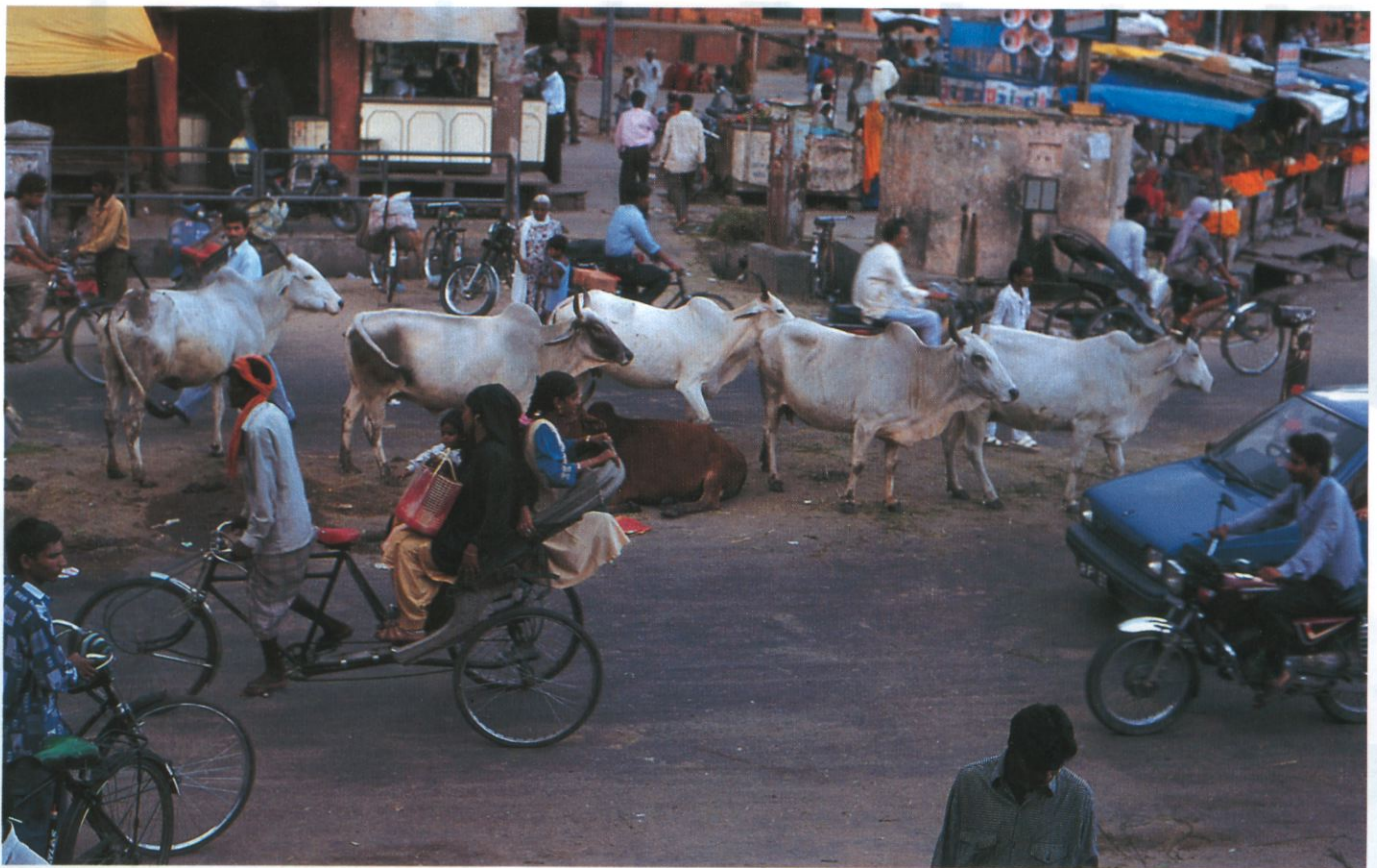
and bones and other parts of the body like intestines which have various uses. However, there are other benefits of the cow which are beyond the purvey of scientific scrutiny. Sages tell us that no matter how advanced instrumentation may become, man will

never be able to unravel the subtlety of the cow's qualities which are sung in the scriptures.

It isn't surprising that the cow is then actually worshipped. Big and small, there are many festivals all over India which are dedicated to the worship of the cow but none is as important as the Gopashtami celebrated with great fanfare especially in rural India. Besides the festivals there are also fairs all over Indian countryside where along with milch cows, colourful cow jewellery and clothing

Above: Rounded up in a drive to keep the streets free of stray cows, this lot looks out of a state pen for its feed
Below: People come to bathe in the sacred waters of the Ganges at the Gai or Cow Ghat in India's holy city of Varanasi





Though not understood by foreigners, cows in the streets is yet another paradox Indians seem to have accepted as an intrinsic part of their reality

is also sold. I watched a farmer at Nagaur fair (in Rajasthan) buy a pair of silver horn jewellery for his cow with as much care and affection as was probably reserved for his wife!

But the romance of the cow is at dusk or what Indians call the hour of *Gaudhuli* literally "cow-dust". There is a mystique in the tinkling of cow bells as herds return from the days foraging, kicking up a cloud of dust just when the sun is going down. This is a special time, considered auspicious especially for marriages. So intimate is the cow's association with the lives of Hindus that in all the rites of passage of life, almost from conception to cremation, the cow is connected to ceremony and ritual.

Perhaps the most significant tribute to the cow is paid during *havan* or the formal fire ritual conducted by a priest. No *havan* is said to be complete without the presence of *panchgavya* or the five gifts of the cow, namely milk, yoghurt, ghee, gobar and *gau mutra*. In the Hindu world view, to give cow charity or *gau daan* is considered the highest act of piety.

But if you cannot afford to give a cow in charity, you can certainly feed one. At an individual level, people

routinely feed the cows — especially the wandering ones in the streets. But what is unique to India are several institutions that look after the cow, chief among them is the *Gaushala* or "House of the Cow". Conceptually different from the dairy, the *gaushalas*, the *gau sadans*, the *pinjara pols* etc. maintain even the non-milking, old and sick cows along with those that are physically handicapped and need human care and attention for survival. Mr. Ramavtar Aggarwal, Office Secretary of the All India Gaushala Federation said that there are more than 3000 Gaushalas in India which are charitable trusts managed by public funds.

There are many other institutions that also look after the interests of the cow. So one really wonders how come cows are still on the streets? Talking to a wide cross section of people including bureaucrats, politicians, social workers and those involved with the welfare of the cow, I found the answer as complex as the problem. In the final analysis, it is best to say that there is no will to act either by the people or by the State. Maintaining status quo is the most expedient option. Summing up pithily, a government official said, "One should understand and accept the cows in the

street as yet another paradox of contemporary India."

Perhaps this is the bane of modern times where ancient Indian values seem to be out of place in an industrial society. Traditionalists lament the apathy of educated urban Indians who are ambivalent in their feelings for the cow which seems to have become just another animal. They say that for a country known for its principles of vegetarianism and non-violence, it is a shame that not only is the cow treated so badly but also cow slaughter is still permitted in India.

Gandhi, the father of the nation made a passionate appeal to ban cow slaughter in India. He wrote with great depth of feeling for the cow and called it a "poem of compassion". He said that the cow is the representative of the mute world of animals. With the language of its eyes the cow seems to be saying to Man that 'God has not made you our master so that you could kill or eat or mistreat us. Instead He made you to be our friend and protector'. Such a fine thought can only emerge from this land where the cow is a symbol of its civilization. The songs of glory of the cow is a priceless gift of India to the rest of the world.