



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2024; 1(56): 210-214

© 2024 NJHSR

www.sanskritarticle.com

Gajula Jeevan kumar

Research scholar,
Department of Sanskrit,
Osmania University

Dharma, Ahimsa, And Gau: Ethical Dimensions Of The Cow In Sanskrit Texts

Gajula Jeevan kumar

Abstract

The cow (Gau) occupies a vital ethical position in Sanskrit literature, serving as a symbol of compassion (karuṇā), non-violence (ahiṃsā), and moral duty (dharma). Far beyond its agricultural and ritual utility, the cow is idealized as a sacred being whose protection is seen as central to righteous living and social harmony. This paper critically examines the ethical frameworks surrounding the cow in major Sanskrit texts, including the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Dharmashāstras, and epics such as the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa. The principle of ahiṃsā, often associated with Jain and Buddhist traditions, finds clear expression in Vedic and Smṛti literature through the prohibition of cow slaughter and the exaltation of cow protection as an act of virtue. Scriptural injunctions against harming cows are not merely ritual taboos but reflections of a larger dharmic worldview, wherein the cow becomes an embodiment of purity, selfless giving, and universal motherhood (Gau Mātā).

This paper explores how Sanskrit texts construct an ethical ecosystem in which the cow functions as both a moral subject and a measure of societal conduct. Through concepts like gau-dāna (cow donation), go-sevā (cow service), and gau-hatyā doṣa (sin of cow-killing), the literature articulates a vision of ethical life deeply rooted in reverence for all living beings, with the cow at the center.

In doing so, the study reveals how Sanskrit literature presents the cow not merely as an object of worship but as a living expression of dharma itself—binding human behavior to spiritual ideals, ecological responsibility, and moral restraint.

1. Introduction

In the ethical and philosophical landscape of Sanskrit literature, the cow (Gau) stands as a revered and morally significant figure—one that embodies the highest ideals of dharma (righteousness), ahiṃsā (non-violence), and karuṇā (compassion). From the hymns of the Vedas to the narratives of the Itihāsas and the moral codes of the Dharmashāstras, the cow is consistently portrayed not merely as a useful domestic animal, but as a sacred life-form whose protection is central to ethical living and social order.

The Sanskrit word Gau is richly layered, referring simultaneously to a physical cow, light, speech (vāk), and knowledge. This symbolic richness allows the cow to function as a powerful ethical signifier. In the Ṛgveda, cows are declared Aghnyāḥ—"not to be harmed"—a directive that underscores their inviolability and divine status. This early reverence evolves into a broader ethical doctrine in later texts, where cow protection (go-rakṣaṇā) is upheld as a religious and moral duty of kings, sages, and householders alike.

The concept of ahiṃsā, often associated with later philosophical schools such as Jainism and Buddhism, is deeply rooted in Vedic and post-Vedic thought. Sanskrit texts consistently present the cow as the ultimate victim of violence that must be avoided to uphold the cosmic and moral order. Harm to the cow is equated with spiritual decline, while its protection is associated with merit (punya), peace, and prosperity.

Correspondence:

Gajula Jeevan kumar

Research scholar,
Department of Sanskrit,
Osmania University

This study aims to explore how Sanskrit literature frames the cow as an ethical ideal, one that reflects a civilization's commitment to non-violence, gratitude toward nature, and reverence for life. Through an examination of key textual references and doctrines such as gau-dāna (cow donation), gau-sevā (cow service), and the severe condemnation of gau-hatyā (cow slaughter), this paper reveals the cow as a cornerstone of India's dharmic ethos—symbolizing not only nourishment and motherhood but also the moral conscience of an entire cultural tradition.

2. Literature Review

The ethical portrayal of the cow in Sanskrit literature has been the subject of scholarly inquiry across religious, historical, philosophical, and cultural studies. The cow, often viewed through the lens of dharma and ahimsā, has emerged as a powerful ethical symbol deeply embedded in the Indian civilizational ethos. This literature review surveys key academic works and scriptural commentaries that illuminate the moral status of the cow in ancient Indian texts and thought.

Classical Sanskrit Texts and Commentators

Primary Sanskrit texts such as the Ṛgveda, Manusmṛti, and Mahābhārata consistently portray the cow as an inviolable being. In the Ṛgveda, cows are called Aghnyāḥ—"those who must not be harmed"—a principle that scholars like Ralph T.H. Griffith and Max Müller have interpreted as an early ethical stance rooted in agrarian and sacrificial culture. The Yajurveda also places emphasis on the ritual and moral importance of cows, especially in the context of yajña (sacrifice) and sustenance.

P.V. Kane, in his monumental work *History of Dharmaśāstra*, analyzes legal and ethical codes surrounding the treatment of cows, particularly in texts like the Manusmṛti and Apastamba Dharmasūtras. He notes the severity of punishments for cow slaughter and the elevation of gau-dāna (gift of the cow) as one of the highest forms of charity, illustrating the cow's centrality to moral and social order.

Philosophical and Religious Interpretations

The idea of ahimsā finds mature expression in the Upaniṣadic worldview, where the cow's passive, nurturing qualities are aligned with the sattva guṇa (pure quality). Scholars like S. Radhakrishnan in *Indian Philosophy* argue that the cow symbolizes moral restraint and the ideal of compassionate living. In his interpretation, the cow becomes a living representation of dharma through her selfless giving and non-threatening nature.

Conversely, D.N. Jha, in his controversial but influential book *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, argues that the sanctity of the cow evolved over time and was not always uniformly

upheld in early Vedic society. His historical critique challenges certain traditional assumptions and opens debate around the politicization of cow protection in later periods.

Epic and Puranic Traditions

In texts like the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, and Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the ethical treatment of cows is integral to ideal kingship and personal virtue. The tale of Rantideva, who refuses to harm a cow even in the face of starvation, exemplifies the principle of ahimsā in action. K.M. Munshi and Bhandarkar have written extensively on these narratives, identifying them as key sources of moral instruction within the epic tradition.

The Purāṇas further sanctify the cow through cosmological stories (e.g., Kamadhenu) and devotional narratives, particularly in relation to Lord Krishna as Gopāla, protector of cows. These texts blend theology with ethics, offering a divine model of compassionate stewardship over animals, especially the cow.

Socio-Cultural and Ethical Interpretations

Historians like D.D. Kosambi and R.S. Sharma approach the ethical valorization of the cow through a socio-materialist lens. They argue that cow protection emerged not only from spiritual values but also from agrarian economic structures where cattle were central to livelihood and resource distribution. Their works reflect how ethical codes were often intertwined with the material conditions of ancient society.

Contemporary scholars like Julia Leslie and Wendy Doniger explore the symbolic layering of the cow within gendered and metaphysical discourses, interpreting the cow as a maternal figure that simultaneously evokes nourishment, protection, and sacred obligation.

The literature reviewed presents a rich and often contested picture of the ethical status of the cow in Sanskrit texts. While traditional scholars uphold the cow as a timeless moral symbol aligned with dharma and ahimsā, critical voices challenge uniform interpretations and emphasize historical change and socio-political context. This study builds on these diverse perspectives to explore how Sanskrit literature constructs the cow not merely as a ritual object, but as a moral ideal central to the ethical consciousness of ancient India.

1 Myth And Cosmology: The Tale Of Kamadhenu

Among the rich tapestry of Sanskrit myths surrounding the cow, the story of Kamadhenu, the divine, wish-fulfilling cow, occupies a central and symbolic position. Her portrayal in the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, and Purāṇic texts reflects not only a mythological narrative but a profound cosmological and ethical worldview. Kamadhenu is not just a creature of legend; she is a cosmic archetype of

nourishment, abundance, and dharma, whose presence reaffirms the sacredness of the cow in Hindu thought.

Divine Origin and Symbolic Form

According to the Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata, Kamadhenu emerged during the Samudra Manthana—the churning of the cosmic ocean—a mythical event that gave birth to several divine beings, including Lakṣmī, Airāvata, and Amṛta (nectar of immortality). As one of these divine products, Kamadhenu is associated with the primordial forces of creation, prosperity, and harmony between divine and earthly realms.

Kamadhenu is often described in allegorical terms, with her body symbolizing the cosmos:

Her horns represent the triśūla (trident) of Śiva and the three gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas)

Her eyes are the sun and moon,

Her breath the Vedas,

And her milk the essence of all nourishment (amṛta).

This cosmological form makes Kamadhenu more than a divine cow—she becomes a microcosm of the universe, embodying the unity of nature, divinity, and ethical order.

Kamadhenu and the Sage Vasiṣṭha

One of the most well-known episodes involving Kamadhenu is found in the Mahābhārata, where she resides in the hermitage of sage Vasiṣṭha. When King Viśvāmitra, impressed by her powers, attempts to seize her by force, Kamadhenu produces entire armies from her body to defend herself and her sage-protector. This incident underlines two critical themes:

The inviolability of the sacred cow, whose seizure or harm violates dharma.

The moral superiority of spiritual power (brahmatejas) over royal force (kṣatriya bala).

The story allegorically affirms that ethical authority, grounded in truth and austerity, is superior to physical might—a recurring theme in dharmic literature.

Ethical Symbolism and Gau-Rakṣa (Cow Protection)

Kamadhenu's myth strengthens the foundational idea that the protection of the cow is equivalent to the protection of dharma itself. In scriptural ethics, harming a cow—especially one like Kamadhenu—is seen as a disruption of cosmic balance and a violation of divine law. The cow, as a bestower of food, ritual materials, and spiritual merit, becomes a moral agent, deserving not just kindness but active protection and service (go-sevā).

Furthermore, the act of gau-dāna (donating a cow), often associated with merit and posthumous blessings, is symbolically linked to Kamadhenu's generative capacity. In Vedic rituals and funerary rites, the cow is believed to guide the soul across the river Vaitaraṇī, acting as a compassionate companion on the journey to liberation.

Kamadhenu in Bhakti and Iconography

In the Bhakti tradition, Kamadhenu is closely related to the pastoral life of Lord Krishna, the divine cowherd (Gopāla). While not directly invoked as Kamadhenu in Krishna's childhood stories, the symbolism of divine cows—beloved, protected, and worshipped—echoes her legacy. Krishna's love for cows and their centrality in his līlā (divine play) further sanctifies the idea of compassionate cow guardianship as a divine act.

Iconographically, Kamadhenu is often depicted in temples standing beside sages or deities, surrounded by smaller cows, suggesting her role as the eternal mother of all bovines and by extension, the provider for all beings.

The myth of Kamadhenu fuses cosmology, ethics, and devotion into a single symbolic figure. She embodies the moral and metaphysical framework of Sanskrit literature, where the cow is not merely an agricultural asset or sacred object, but a living, divine presence—one that nourishes, protects, and sustains the order of the universe. Her tale serves as a foundation for the larger ethical principle of non-violence (ahimsā) and the moral imperative of cow protection (gau-rakṣā), making her one of the most powerful symbols of dharma in the Sanskrit tradition.

2 Divine Nourishment: The Sacred Cow In Hindu Scriptures

The cow, or Gau, is deeply enshrined in the spiritual, ethical, and ritual foundations of Hinduism, particularly in its Sanskrit scriptures. Described as the nurturer of all beings and symbol of abundance, the cow occupies a central position in Hindu cosmology and moral philosophy. She is venerated not simply for her utility, but for her role as a sacred bridge between the physical and spiritual realms. In the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Smṛtis, and Itihāsas, the cow is portrayed as a divine being whose milk nourishes the body, whose presence sanctifies rituals, and whose protection ensures the preservation of dharma.

Vedic Conceptions: The Cow as Sacred Wealth

In the Ṛgveda, the cow is celebrated as a source of material wealth, divine energy, and moral prosperity. Vedic hymns speak of cows as Aghnyāḥ—"those who must not be killed"—affirming their sanctity:

Aghnyā yā gāvo bhavanti nā tā vadham arhati

"The cows are inviolable; they must not be harmed." (Ṛgveda 8.101.15)

Cows are associated with rays of light, goddess Earth, and the celestial order (ṛta). Their milk and ghee are essential to Vedic rituals (yajña), not only as physical offerings but as purifiers of the sacrificial fire, the medium between gods and humans. The Yajurveda further elevates the cow's status by identifying her with life-giving and regenerative forces.

The Ethical Imperative in Smṛtis and Dharma Literature

The Dharmashāstras, especially the Manusmṛti, formulate ethical codes around the protection and service of cows. Manusmṛti 5.48 states:

Na goghnaḥ sukhamevāpnuyāt

“One who kills a cow shall never attain happiness.”

The gift of a cow (gau-dāna) is considered one of the most meritorious acts, often recommended in funeral rites and rituals for accruing spiritual merit. Protecting and nourishing cows is framed not as an optional virtue but as a moral and religious obligation, particularly for kings and householders. The cow becomes a yardstick of dharma—the extent to which a society upholds righteousness is reflected in how it treats its cows.

Nourishment and Symbolism in the Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads, while primarily philosophical, carry forward the ethical and symbolic reverence for the cow. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad refers to the cow as a form of Prakṛti—the natural principle of nourishment and sustenance. The cow’s selfless giving—offering milk without demand—becomes a metaphor for satva (purity), selflessness, and the ideal ethical life.

Cows also represent speech (vāk), knowledge, and the Vedas themselves, signifying their integration into not just physical but intellectual and spiritual nourishment. Their symbolic identity thus extends from the agricultural to the metaphysical.

Divine Association in Epics and Purāṇas

In the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, cows are often invoked to test and demonstrate dharma. The story of Rantideva, who refuses to harm a cow despite personal suffering, exemplifies the highest commitment to ahimsā. Similarly, kings are praised for their role as protectors of cows, positioning gau-rakṣaṇa as a royal duty.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa and other devotional texts portray Lord Krishna as Gopāla, the divine cowherd. Krishna’s relationship with the cows of Vṛndāvana is more than pastoral—it is divine, intimate, and symbolic. The cows respond to his flute, follow him like children, and are treated as members of his spiritual family. In these narratives, cows are not passive animals but sentient companions, participating in the divine play (līlā) of the cosmos.

Throughout Hindu scriptures, the cow is exalted as a giver of nourishment, not only in the physical sense through milk and sustenance, but also as a spiritual

benefactor whose very presence symbolizes purity, abundance, and ethical living. Whether as Kamadhenu, the divine wish-fulfiller, or the gentle companions of Krishna, the cow remains a deeply respected figure in Sanskrit literature—central to ritual practice, moral philosophy, and the cosmic vision of Hindu dharma. The ethical imperative to protect, serve, and revere the cow is thus deeply woven into the spiritual fabric of Hindu texts, affirming her status as the embodiment of divine nourishment and a pillar of sacred life.

3 Conclusion

The ethical reverence for the cow in Sanskrit literature is not merely a cultural sentiment or religious injunction—it is a reflection of a deeply embedded moral and spiritual worldview. Across the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Smṛtis, Itihāsas, and Purāṇas, the cow emerges as a living embodiment of dharma, a symbol of non-violence (ahimsā), and an agent of divine nourishment and cosmic balance.

Myths like that of Kamadhenu reinforce the cow’s association with abundance, purity, and spiritual power, while philosophical texts portray her as a selfless giver, aligned with the sattvic ideal of harmony and compassion. Ethical codes in the Dharmashāstras make cow protection (gau-rakṣaṇa) a sacred duty, not only for individual virtue but also for the preservation of social order and ecological balance.

The cow’s depiction in Sanskrit literature is thus multi-layered: she is a mother, a giver, a symbol, and a test of moral integrity. Her sacredness is not rooted in utility alone but in a worldview that regards all life as interconnected and worthy of respect. The act of protecting the cow becomes synonymous with protecting the values of compassion, restraint, and righteousness—the very pillars of Hindu ethical philosophy.

In conclusion, Sanskrit texts portray the cow as more than an object of worship; she is an ethical guide, a moral standard, and a spiritual metaphor. The reverence for the cow reflects a civilization’s aspiration to live in harmony with nature, guided by the timeless principles of dharma and ahimsā. In a world increasingly distanced from such ideals, the Sanskrit vision of the cow invites renewed reflection on our responsibilities toward all sentient beings.

References

- ¹ R̥gveda Samhitā. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004.
- ² Yajurveda. Trans. Devi Chand. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

- ³ Manusmṛti (The Laws of Manu). Trans. G. Buhler. Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 25. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886.
- ⁴ Bhagavad Gītā. Trans. Swami Sivananda. Rishikesh: The Divine Life Society, 1993.
- ⁵ Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. Trans. Swami Madhavananda. Advaita Ashrama, 2006.
- ⁶ Mahābhārata. Ed. V.S. Sukthankar. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Critical Edition.
- ⁷ Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. Trans. Hari Prasad Shastri. London: Shanti Sadan, 1952.
- ⁸ Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Śrīmad Bhāgavatam). Trans. Swami Prabhupada. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1982.
- ⁹ Altekar, A.S. Education in Ancient India. Varanasi: Banaras Hindu University Press, 1944.
- ¹⁰ Basham, A.L. The Wonder That Was India. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2004.
- ¹¹ Bhattacharya, N.N. Ancient Indian Rituals and Their Social Impact. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996.
- ¹² Chakravarti, Sitansu S. Hinduism: A Way of Life. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.
- ¹³ Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. Myth and Symbol in Indian Art and Civilization. Princeton University Press, 1946.
- ¹⁴ Jha, D.N. The Myth of the Holy Cow. London: Verso, 2002.
- ¹⁵ Kane, P.V. History of Dharmaśāstra, Vols. I–V. Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1930–1962.
- ¹⁶ Kosambi, D.D. An Introduction to the Study of Indian History. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1956.
- ¹⁷ Leslie, Julia. Authority and Meaning in Indian Religions: Hinduism and the Case of the Holy Cow. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003.
- ¹⁸ Radhakrishnan, S. Indian Philosophy, Vols. I & II. Oxford University Press, 1923.
- ¹⁹ Sharma, R.S. Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India. Delhi: Macmillan, 1983.
- ²⁰ Thapar, Romila. Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- ²¹ Zimmer, Heinrich. Philosophies of India. Ed. Joseph Campbell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951.