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PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL LEITMOTIFS IN THE DOCUMENTARIES ON THE INDIAN COWS

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ABSTRACT

Much to the chagrin of the Bollywood cinema that has produced countless blockbusters on the Hindu deities, there have been hardly a couple of them on cows – the most worshipped living deities in every Indian household. While the Indian philosophies have celebrated the spirit of *anima mundi* centuries before the term was coined in the West, it is a matter of grave concern that majority of the documentaries covering the plight of the bovine livestock in the country contain obsecrating overtones –emotional or spiritual- rather than having a thought-provoking or eco-inspiring approach towards the predicament. In the present paper, I wish to scrutinize a few selected documentaries on Indian cows, in the light of the manner, in which they address the civilizational malaise. My major areas of concerns in the paper – the visual and sound imagery, religious symbols and spirituality, and the *mise en scene* - will be studied on the basis of some of the principles of ecopsychology, such as the “eco unconscious,” “ecological ego” and the “dialogue between the macrocosm and microcosm.”

Keywords: images, sound, psychological leitmotifs, spiritual leitmotifs, eco-unconscious, eco-ego, dialogue, *mise en scene*

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With more than twenty documentaries (long and short) released during the last decade on the ever increasing number of television channels and with the heavy influx of the social networking sites on the e-horizons, the viewer- consumer or subscriber is exposed to a wide range of issues pertaining to the bovine causes, including the ones that require immediate attention as well as the ones in the offing. Amidst the current hullabaloo of the beef crisis, further spruced by the religio-political broil, an umpteen number of short video footages have made significant additions to the repertoire. Undoubtedly, these films have successfully captured a wider coverage of the problem, projecting various viewpoints on a subject that had hardly caught the attention of the common people in the country. Nonetheless, this situation has also, arguably led to the emergence of what could be termed as “pseudo ecological-concerns,” more fanatic in nature rather than being diagnostic, and above all, devoid of any kind of result yielding outputs. These

“pseudo ecological- concerns” do have free fall occurrences on social media, often leading to impulsive and at times, tempestuous responses (in the form of the viewers’ comments below the video-screen) but they seemingly fail to leave a long lasting, ecological impact on the viewers. Since this paper aims to review the selected documentaries from the ecopsychological perspective, my major areas of concern will be to study :the interplay of the emotional and spiritual leitmotifs; location as an important element of *mise en scene*; and the use of symbols and imagery in the films. This study will be carried out on the basis of a few selected principles of ecopsychology such as the “eco unconscious,” “ecological ego” and the “dialogue between the macrocosm and microcosm. Collaterally, the issues related to the nature and scope of the viewership will also be a part of the study. A few important questions, of course, not categorically but parenthetically, to be addressed in this paper are : other than the virtual communities, who watches these documentaries ; which age group should be targeted for their viewership; whether their viewership seriously contributes to the social reform processes required to improve the prevailing situation of malaise; and above all, should their narrative patterns, dialogues and *mise en scene* be appropriated keeping in mind the target age groups. This paper aims to find answers to some of these questions.

Taxonomically some of the major leitmotifs running through the documentaries could be broadly classified into two categories: psychological and spiritual. While both the categories tend to exhibit overlapping as well as polarizing tendencies, the commonalities among them accentuate the excruciatingly painful condition of the cattle stock in the country whose rural economy and society once thwarted on the principle of near zero waste agronomic conditions. Ill-treatment, malnourishment, exploitation, endangerment of species, abandonment and the transportation of the “useless” cattle to slaughter houses are the recurring (sub)themes endeavoured by the film makers to magnify the intensity of the cause. Essentially, the factors responsible for this ecological disequilibrium, as suggested by them are: the onslaught of technology in the agricultural sectors; consumerist behaviour; per capita consumption of milk; the invincible problem of production and accumulation of the garbage dumps (especially, the plastic bags); and the cross breeding of the Indian cows with those of the Western breeds.

Centripetally forth, the (sub)themes intersect at the point of what Sigmund Freud terms as the “psychopathology of everyday life” (1914) where the human tends to display the Heathcliff syndrome- being oblivious/ungrateful- towards the bovine benignity. The directors/producers juggle with the euphemistic projections of the sacred with the sacrilegious; the consumerist behaviour vis-à-vis the ritualistic/spiritual sentiment - the one that promises salvation. Most of the documentaries play upon the sentiments of fear, guilt, shame and depravity attached to the human treatment of cows ending with a note of caution against the denial or impediment in the process of attaining epiphanic booties promised by the scriptures. For instance, the notion of cow as the symbol of the archetypal mother- “the benign madonnal figure, the *gau mata*” - in *The Plastic Cow* (www.karunasociety.org) and *Save the Holy Cow* (www.gokranti.com) is reiterated in the documentaries tapping the human psyche on the sensory, perceptual, sentient and spiritual levels. As a consequence, the viewers, if at all sensitized, may either commiserate or sympathise with the creatures, or on a more positive note. trail along an awareness that could possibly lead to a result-oriented action.

Amidst the sounds of the heralding conch accompanied by the melodious flute - the powerful sound elements used in the *mise en scene* of both these films- the opening scenes appear with the narrators presenting the consecrated images of the animal, glorifying the past rich heritage of the Vedic culture in India. What immediately follows is a series of shocking visuals or images wherein the sacred animals are reduced to being scavengers for the want of food; left to fend for themselves by their owners on account of their unproductive status in their old age. A dichotomous juxtaposition of audio-visual scenes leaves the viewers confounded, almost in a state of shock, not knowing whether to revere/ worship the living deity –the “sacred cow” -or to protect her. But the exercise does not end there. Marked with insinuations and words of cautions against the present neglected status of the benign creatures, the narrators tap the viewer’s psyche to release what Theodore Roszak terms as the “repression of the ecological unconscious [which] is the deepest root of collusive madness in an industrial society (“The Voice of the Earth: Discovering the Ecological

Ego,"1992,np). They do so by a constant flow of interjections – making imperative / rhetorical statements ,“Think for a whileSo what have you thought about the problem” (*Save the Holy Cow*) or asking thought-provoking questions to the viewers such as, “Is this a by-product of modern living or simply a consequence of our choices?” (*The Plastic Cow*). Mixed with the tones of regrets, often leading to the volume of being admonitions, both the features present heartaching visual and verbal sequences, lamenting the loss of the “innate animism” (Roszak,1992), the profound sentiment that people in the Vedic Age lived with. In fact, this dichotomous juxtaposition of the sacred and the sacrilegious ladles out some of the ecological concerns beyond the issues of bovine activism.

In his article “What is Ecopsychology,” Carl Golden, a practising ecotherapist observes, “The illusion of a separation of humans and nature leads to suffering both for the environment (as ecological devastation) and for humans (as grief, despair, and alienation)” (www.soulcraft.com). Quoting the views of some of the leading Eco psychologists, Goldman opines that there is a direct connection between the environmental imbalance and human insanity. He quotes James Hillman, who raises a fundamental question, "How can a person be sane in an insane environment?" According to Hillman, psychology needs to include not only environmental issues, but issues of social, political, and economic justice, as well” (www.soulcraft.com).

Most of the documentaries on Indian cows reiterate that corruption is at the base of the bovine problem. The capitalist approach of dairy owners - exploiting/ abusing the bovine stock – has been responsible for the nexus formed among the municipal or administrative bodies, dairy industries and government bodies that take care of animal welfare activities. The four major issues the documentaries identify that fosters this civilizational malaise are: the wandering of the useless cattle on the streets; the large amount of plastic bags entering their bodies ; the final destination of the abandoned cows/bulls to the slaughter houses; and the endangerment of the Indian breeds with some of them already extinct and others on the verge of it. In the statements recorded of the social activists, religious leaders, ,veterinary doctors, lay persons, and workers in the sheds, the common complaint is the negligence on the part of the municipal authorities that is solely responsible for the rise in the number of slaughter houses in the country. The government’s stand on the Pink Revolution in the food industry seems to be buttressing for the entrepreneurs and non-committal to the cause. Moreover, the White and the Green Revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s have also increased the dependence of the farmers on machines and tractors, thereby, making the bulls totally obsolete. The “smuggling” of these unproductive cattle to Bangladesh for the processing of beef is not only responsible for the decreasing number of population of cows but also for the extinction of some of the rare breeds of Indian cows. Another reason for the extinction of the Indian cow breeds is the promotion of the Western breeds like Jersey and HF cows who have better milk-yielding capacity. Needless to mention the role of political leaders who have their own arithmetic of vote vending practices. Thus, what emerges is the negligence and stoicism on every stakeholder of society, be it the authorities, common human, dairy owner, politicians and above all, the religious leaders.

Considering the statistics of viewership of the documentaries, the one in the highest rung is *Sacred Cows of India* (www.dailymotion.com), the musical with a soothing melodious parody of a Bollywood tune. With more than 66,000 viewers, the film touches upon the religious, mythological and spiritual sentiments of its viewers *The Plastic Cow* is second in the race with more than 60,000 viewers *Save the Holy Cow* (Gokranti) and *India’s Holy Cow: Becoming Extinct?* (krishna.org) have fetched more than 25,000 viewers. Interestingly, most of the documentaries have been sponsored, supported or spearheaded by the religious *mathas* (religious/spiritual organisations) who propagate vegetarianism and have taken up the mission – “ Stop killing the cows.” The words “mother,” “sacred”, “holy”, “moving temple” or “worship” comprise most of the titles of the documentaries, conveying the feelings of religiosity among the believers.

The Plastic Cow and *India’s Holy Cow: Becoming Extinct?* are filmed on the activities of two *gaushalas*, the assistance home for the abandoned cows. Interestingly, the two *gaushalas* are headed by women of foreign origins. The one at Radhakund, near Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh is a self-funded *gaushala* run by Mother Sudevi Dasi, a German who has settled in Radhakund and adopted Hindu, Vedic ways of living.

The other at Puttapparthi in Andhra Pradesh is headed by Clementine Pauws, the President of Karuna Society For Animals and Nature. Clementine's vision is "the Divine Unity in all reality that binds humans, animals, nature and the universe together" (quoted from <http://www.karunasociety.org/about/meet-the-staff>). While Sudevi Dasi adds "karmic actions and values" to the cause of rehabilitating the abandoned cows, Clementine adds spiritual values to her actions. Both the activists are illustrious examples of what could be said to have developed a healthy "eco-ego" (Catherine Honora Kineavy, 1997). In their conversations with the narrators, they display the tendencies of initiating a "dialogue between the microcosm and macrocosm" (Roszak, 1992). In the idyllic world of the ancient times, Roszak believes:

[The], "above" was the macrocosm, the world of the heavenly spheres, the angelic hosts, and Dame Nature vast as all the planet Earth. "Below" was the microcosm, the human soul. Between these two - celestial intelligence and the inner being of man - there was said to be a vital link. Macrocosm spoke to microcosm; microcosm reflected macrocosm. The two were in living dialogue. Understanding the universe was a matter of listening, having ears to hear the music of the spheres, the voice of the Earth. Wisdom meant connecting (Roszak, 1992).

During the Vedic age, the cow was considered to be the *udgitha*, "the upholder of the world and sung by gods" (*Life in the Upanishads*, Sharma, 140). In his edited volume *The Upanishadas*, Eknath Easwaran notes that cows were gifted as medals or awards and the human wealth was measured in terms of the number of cows in possession ("The Brihadaranyak Upanishad," 104). Sudevi's responses to the questions asked to her by the interviewer in the film remarkably reflects the overtones of the Vedic philosophy. Of course, the ground reality that waits for her is the funds required for the fodder for her inmates and the remuneration of her workforce.

The "macrocosm-microcosm" realms are "divorced" (Roszak, 1992) when the materialistic tendencies supersede the pristine innocence. The roles played by the activists Clementine Pauws and Sudevi Dasi certainly help to re-establish the link between the two. They act as ecotherapists who undertake painstaking efforts to heal the wounds inflicted by the human kind on Mother Nature.

The recurring motifs in *The Plastic Cow* and *India's Holy Cow: Becoming Extinct* associated with ritualistic/religious/spiritual beliefs that are present in almost all the documentaries are the visuals projecting paintings, photographs, idols and sketches of Lord Krishna with the cows and his flute. Ubiquitously, the viewer finds the image of a white cow with the thumbnails of the majority of Indian gods associated with cow/bull in almost all videos. Quite contrary to these jocund visuals are the ugly projections of some of the sights of slaughter houses, butcheries, and meat shops. The obnoxious images of the chunks of beef with dried blood stains on them leave a painful impression on the viewer, especially the one who is a vegan or a vegetarian.

While the film-makers constantly play with the psychological and spiritual leitmotifs, what is remarkably missing from the documentaries is the effort to foster or inculcate the values of mutual co-existence, harmony and tolerance in the viewers. The target viewer is supposedly the educated, techno-savvy, ecologically conscious individual who participates in the discussion by sharing his views. The ecopsychologists believe that the intrinsic values of compassion, universal benevolence and respect for all should be inculcated or rather not allowed to disappear among the human beings when they grow up as adults. In Roszak's views, this principle acts as follows:

For ecopsychology as for other therapies, the crucial stage of development is the life of the child. The ecological unconscious is regenerated, as if it were a gift, in the child's enchanted sense of the world. If the rearing and education of the young preserved and deepened this spontaneous experience, ecopsychology would be left without a therapeutic role (Roszak, 1992).

No matter how cliché the suggestion may seem to be, I conclude by putting forth a simple question: rather than projecting the ugly, unpleasant and unsightly version of the bitter reality, how about producing short animated children's- films fostering the values of universal love, respect, tolerance, peace, harmony and eco-consciousness right from the childhood? Of course, a deep contemplation is required to address this issue.

As the old axiom goes –prevention is better than cure- let us all agree to reinstate the lost ecological consciousness in our day today life by sensitizing ourselves to the needs and problems of the non-human creatures in the world.

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