

# RelBib

Bibliography of the Study of Religion

<https://relbib.de>

Dear reader,

the article

*The Mythical Cow as Everyone's Mother. Breastfeeding as a main theme in Hindu-religious imaginings of loved and feared mothers* by Gerrit Lange

was originally published in

Breastfeeding(s) and religions / International Workshop Breastfeeding(s) and Religions. – Roma: Scienze e lettere, 2019. – pp. 149–166

URL: <http://www.scienzelettere.it/book/50165.html>

This article is used by permission of [www.scienzelettere.it/](http://www.scienzelettere.it/).

Thank you for supporting Green Open Access.  
Your RelBib team

THE MYTHICAL COW AS EVERYONE’S MOTHER.  
BREASTFEEDING AS A MAIN THEME IN HINDU-RELIGIOUS IMAGININGS OF  
LOVED AND FEARED MOTHERS

*Gerrit Lange*

“What did you eat in the forest? I ate nothing because of the distress caused by being separated from you. Drink at my overflowing breasts and eat some food!”<sup>1</sup>

*Introduction*

With these words Goddess Pārvatī gave her breast to her son, Gaṇeśa, who at this time was nine years old and just arrived home after killing some demons in the forest. Of the huge horde of other boys accompanying him, some had been eaten by the demons – but, to ease the sorrow of their mothers, Gaṇeśa shifted into their shapes and visited their mothers, who “got up and quickly took their sons. Filled with the highest joy, they affectionately gave them the breast”<sup>2</sup>. When Skanda, the other son of Pārvatī and Śiva, was born, she “immediately experienced that milk was oozing from her nipples”<sup>3</sup> – even though she had not carried him in her womb. Instead, he was born by the river Gaṅgā as well as by six virgins.

In Hindu myths and iconography, bovine and human women often spontaneously pour out streams of milk, affected by *vatsalarati*, the love of a cow to her calf (*vatsa*). Lord Kṛṣṇa, even more than the aforementioned infant-shaped universal Gods, embodies the unity of expressed motherly love and secreted motherly milk. Born from one human mother, queen Devakī, but suckled and raised by another, the cowherd Yaśodā, he becomes the object of the sometimes rivalling love of these two women in the poetry of *Surdās*, the famous devotional

---

<sup>1</sup> *Gaṇeśapurāṇa* II.99.64f.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaṇeśapurāṇa* II.99.60.

<sup>3</sup> *Skandapurāṇa* I.1.27. 81.

poet from the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. As the omnipresent blue baby (fig. 1), he inspires this generalized and religiously enriched maternal love in human devotees of all genders, especially among those who belong to the Vallabhite tradition<sup>5</sup>. By feeding little Kṛṣṇa with milk products and sweets and by melting away in contemplation of his cuteness, brought to an extreme in religious images, one may approach his celestial realm: the *goloka* or “world of cows”.

Fig. 2 presents Kāmadhenu, the “fulfiller of what is desired”, alongside the “fragrant” cow-woman Surābhī. The former cow is depicted as a container of all gods and the whole universe – a motive going back 2000 years, to hymns of the Mahābhārata:

*surūpā bahurūpās ca viśvarūpās ca mātaraḥ | gāvo*

“The cows are mothers; they are well-formed, multi-formed, formed like the universe”<sup>6</sup>.

“The Hindu Imagination” as a coherent category, uniting the whole space of South Asia and the last three to four millennia, is of course itself an imagination. While this essay points out several motives connecting classical myths and practices with each other and with current ones, I do not want to draw a picture of anything like an Indian or Hindu mentality. The (post)colonial background of combining the philology, ethnography and history of South Asia, regarding which the borders between disciplines are much more permeable than those drawn by researchers on Europe, has been pointed out by many, amongst them Veena Das<sup>7</sup>.

Ritual and mythological contents are contents of discourses, embedded in cultural contexts and motivated acts of promoting, but also changing traditions. Sticking to this conviction does not mean to dismiss psychological and psychoanalytical explanations in total, but to restrain from any interpretation without an

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Pasche Guignard 2016, 166, presenting a beautiful selection of poems around Kṛṣṇa, breastfeeding, butter, cows and motherly responsibility. In her translation from the Braj language, Kṛṣṇa can be admired as he “swallows the butter, spills milk on the floor, smears his body with curd, then chases after any children in the house, spraying them with butter-whey” (Pasche Guignard 2016, 173) – a child’s mischief, annoying his mother, is identified with the divine spreading of ritual substances, of the milk products in which blessing (*prasāda*) becomes manifest. In her conclusion, Pasche Guignard raises the central question not only for understanding Braj poetry, but also Sanskrit mythological plots and still current ritual dramaturgies: “Are these emotions predominantly religious or maternal? *Vātsalya bhāva* blends them together and validates maternal feelings as appropriate for a *bhakti* path. Even irritation and anger felt by a mother—or other women dealing with the naughty child—are channels for *bhakti* in the *vātsalya bhāva* ‘emotional-relational-devotional’ mode” (Pasche Guignard 2016, 177).

<sup>5</sup> Toomey (1990).

<sup>6</sup> *Mahābhārata* 13.79.12, own translation.

<sup>7</sup> Das 1993, 414.

epistemological base for applying it to a specific phenomenon. The motives of milk, breastfeeding and its poisonous reversal are spread widely enough to legitimize cross-temporal and trans-regional comparisons and generalizations. The distinction between the “mild and wild goddesses”<sup>8</sup> of Sanskrit mythology, for instance, can be easily recognized in current Hindu rituals. In the Himalaya, where I conduct fieldwork, many ritual specialists strictly differentiate between fierce Goddesses who demand animal sacrifices and the mild ones to whom they mainly offer milk. “Blood or milk make a Goddess”, the “mother” of her region or village, who she is. This has a huge impact on the imaginations of fierce and devote motherhoods, personified in many mythological beings and creatures.

In two chapters on desired and on feared breasts, I portray the all-encompassing Prthvī, who is Earth both as idealized mother and as cow, and later the demoness Putanā, whose milk is poison and whose breasts are weapons for infanticide. My conclusion aims to synthesize these construed opposites into one Hindu-religious theme, namely the unity of lactation and emotion.

I have never had the experience of producing milk myself, nor am I able to remember being breastfed. Neither will any of these stories and ritual complexes be new for Hindu practitioners and believers amongst my readers. Still, I hope to shed some light (or better, some milk<sup>9</sup>) upon the question how motherhoods emerge, like the cow out of an ocean of milk, between culturally synchronized sentiments and expectations. Milk, mother, child and calf are enacted and performed as symbols overflowing with religious connotations, mythical allusions, ritual usability and emotion.

*“Good breasts:” The cosmic cow, her maternal love and her milk*

In Hindu religious thoughts, narratives and practices, the milk of cows and other mothers can have many connotations. For once, being the first nourishment of most mammals, it is able to represent nourishment as such<sup>10</sup>. The powerful

---

<sup>8</sup> Michaels 2004, 221.

<sup>9</sup> Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987 elaborates on “milk metaphors and similes in ordinary speech and in literature, [comparing, for instance,] the *Upaniṣads* to cows and the *Bhagavad Gītā* to their milk [...]. In modern Tamil ‘to drink the milk of the mind’ stands for having pleasant thoughts. The nurturing associations of motherhood may be expressed as the ‘compassion of milk’, and compassion rising in the heart is like milk collected in the breast. The beneficial effect of friendly words may be compared to milk being poured into one’s stomach. A fervent religious song sung at the sea shore seems to transform the salty ocean into a new milk ocean; three Vaiṣṇava saints who happened to meet conversed joyfully ‘as if milk were added to milk’ [...]. Saint Tiruṇānacampantamūrṭti acquired the gift of composing immortal poems after he had tasted Pārvatī’s milk”.

<sup>10</sup> Nourishment as such, *anna*, is a central category of Hindu religions, traceable back even from Vedic times. Probably originated between the ninth and the sixth century BCE, the *Bṛhadaranyaka-Upaniṣad*

motives of milk, motherhood, cows and spiritual devotion are tied together by a complex knot of symbols and metaphors.

Like the old Egyptians, according to Plutarch<sup>11</sup>, the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* and the older *Mahābhārata* have Earth herself appearing as a cow. “Good mothers” are compared to cows as well to the earth, with whom they share the ascribed virtue of patience<sup>12</sup>.

Pr̥thivī, the Earth, contained the specific nourishment of each species inhabiting her. After this mother of matter had been mistreated by her inhabitants, she had consequently withdrawn all food from all beings. When, then, “the many-shaped ground that carries everything put on the shape of a cow”<sup>13</sup>, the members of every species had to present her one of them as a “calf” to stimulate her motherly feelings, in order to make her bring forth “milk” (Skt. *kṣīra*, *payas* or *dugdha*), which is their own respective nourishment<sup>14</sup>. It remains untold whether the milk was “really” transformed into other food – meat for the carnivores, nectar for the gods, alcohol for the *Asura* demons, poison for the serpents, and so on – or whether the milk stands as a metonym for all food.

Although all the species eat quite different things and substances, it was all stored as milk in Earth’s body – but, of course, a secretion of the body cannot simply be taken out like a bottle in a fridge. Like the sources of sweat and tears, also the mammary glands need a stimulation to produce – an affective stimulation, having both bodily and emotional causes and effects. The only way to achieve this aim, to bodily and emotionally stimulate a cow to lactate, is to make her see, smell and feel her calf. Apparently, Mother Earth as cow has no conscious control over her lactation, but needs to be aroused into the *vatsala* state, overwhelmed by maternal affection towards a calf.

Thus she told the gathered beings:

---

already defined mutual consumption as the main aspect of how all beings relate to each other and to the Earth, Pr̥thivī, who is *madhu*, “honey for all the beings, who are honey for the Earth” (*iyam̐ pr̥thivī sarveṣāṃ bhūtānāṃ madhu | asyai pr̥thivyai sarvāṇi bhūtāni madhu; Bṛhadaraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* 2.5.1, own translation).

<sup>11</sup> “They regard both the cow and the earth as the image of Isis” (*De Iside et Osiride*, 39. Transl. by F.C. Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge 1936).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Harivaṃśa 48.72 has Devakī, the natural mother of Kṛṣṇa, place her infant in front of his uncle Kaṃsa, of whom she knows that he wants to kill the baby. While placing the infant on earth (*pr̥thivyām*), she behaves stoically “like Earth herself” (*pr̥thivīsamā*).

<sup>13</sup> *dadhāra go-rūpaṃ dharitrī bahu-rūpiṇī (Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 4.17.3).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Lange 2017, 68 ff, and, for an older version of the narrative, *Atharvaveda* 8.10.

“Provide me with a calf (*vatsa*), oh hero! Filled by it with motherly love (*vatsala*), I will pour out the desired goods as milk (or ‘like milk’, *kṣīra-maya*)”<sup>15</sup>.

Now, that her conditions were clear, all the beings provided their respective leader as a “calf” for Earth. According to her wish, different species approached her:

The mountain Udaya [became] a calf, the huge mount Meru the milker and the stones their vessel; thus they got jewels and herbs as their milk; [...] the humans ‘milked’ agriculture and the crops from the surface of Earth; their “calf” was their ancestor Manu, who had created himself, and their milker was Pṛthu. [The cobra-shaped *Nāg* deities] Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Takṣaka, who became milker and calf, milked poison into a pumpkin as their vessel<sup>16</sup>.

Again, it remains unclear whether they shifted their shape, merely played a role or were metaphorically treated as calves.

Sometimes cows do not give milk, but milk gives cows. Very well-known creation myths tell about *samudramanthana*, the churning of a whole ocean of milk to gain butter, then ghee, then *amṛt*, the nectar of immortality. This process of refinement also brings forth other beneficent beings – among them is the cow Kāmadhenu, the “wish-fulfilling” one, here called Havirdhānī<sup>17</sup>, the “provider of offerings” like milk, curd and ghee. Often alongside cow urine and dung, these “five products of the cow” (*pañcagavya*) are still amongst the most prominent ritual substances, to an extent that “life-cycle rituals almost always include pouring, dripping, sprinkling, rubbing or consuming some product of the cow”<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the myth – a religious story – gains importance by referring to rituals, i.e. religious practices. These, in turn, up till now gain prestige and authenticity by recurring to the story.

In the more secular realms of traditional Indian medicine, milk always plays a role as a “cooling” (*saumya*) substance, good for healing “fiery” (*āgneya*) affliction, like fever or psychical arousal<sup>19</sup>, which are caused by some form of ex-

---

<sup>15</sup> *vatsaṃ kalpayā me vīra yenāhaṃ vatsalā tava | dhokṣye kṣīramayān kāmān [...]* (*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 4.18.9, own translation).

<sup>16</sup> *udayaḥ parvato vatso merur dogdhā mahāgiriḥ | ratnāny oṣadhayo dugdhaṃ pātram āsmamayaṃ tathā || [...] kṣiṃ ca sasyaṃ ca narā duduhuḥ pṛthivītale | svāyaṃbhuvo manur vatsas teṣāṃ dogdhābhavat pṛthuḥ || alābupātre ca tathā viṣaṃ dugdhā vasuṃdharā | dhṛtarāṣṭro 'bhavad dogdhā teṣāṃ vatsas tu takṣakaḥ* (*Mahābhārata* 7.49.21d; 8.798-804, own translation).

<sup>17</sup> *Gaṇeśapurāṇa* 8.8.1.

<sup>18</sup> Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987, 116.

<sup>19</sup> In Sanskrit, “heat” (*tapas*) can also refer to “pain”, to “distress”, to “suffering” in general, or to religious austerities and to the power thereby gained.

cessive energy – or by an energetically, fiercely uttered curse. In the body, “cool” denotes “stabilized, sterile, and nonprocreative states”<sup>20</sup>.

Consuming milk and other white substances is also believed to provide strength and manliness – a relation to *semen virile*, another white bodily fluid associated with strength and the (pro-)creation of life, is implied. In his study about North Indian wrestlers’ bodies, Andrew Alter (1992) points out that they keep a diet based on milk, ghee and almonds and, like in some Yoga traditions, try to keep their semen within their body. These are means to “cool” sexual passion and to gather strength. According to his interpretation, both the consumed milk and the retained semen symbolize the imagined transformation of sexually potent men into a-sexual children of the Earth Mother, represented by the fighting pit, and of their sexual potency into strength; “Maternity neutralizes passion, and it is in this respect [...] that milk plays an important symbolic role in a wrestler’s diet”<sup>21</sup>.

While providing ample evidence for such a symbolic complex behind the wrestlers’ diet and their ritual veneration of the pit’s earth, Alter’s interpretations are less plausible when milk becomes “a special kind of semen [and] the symbolic opposite of male semen”<sup>22</sup>, while “the breast becomes the phallus from which semen rather than milk is sucked out”<sup>23</sup>.

Clearly, the cow as an ideal mother does set norms and therefore has social and psychological consequences, regarding what is expected from women and what constitutes a good mother – namely, giving rather than keeping, selfless rather than self-reliant and independent. However, does that mean that the Hindu mother as such – and throughout the ages and spaces – is constructed as the site of a whole inner “alchemy”<sup>24</sup>, as Alter seems to suggest?

*“Evil breasts:” A breastfeeding demoness and poison as anti-milk*

Alter claims: “Poison is the symbolic opposite of milk: it takes life where milk gives forth life in a number of different ways. [...] Milk is the symbolic

---

<sup>20</sup> Daniel 1984, 198. *ghī*, on the other hand, is milk in a very concentrated state and therefore seen as “fiery”. Therefore, it is used to treat “cool” diseases. In the body, the hot and the cool are identified with bile and phlegm – an idea probably influenced by Greek Humoral Pathology, which is still present in India as the *Yavana* strand of medicine.

<sup>21</sup> Alter 1992, 121.

<sup>22</sup> Alter 1992, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Alter 1992, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Alter 1992, 124.

opposite of erotic passion [...]. Dangerous female passion is cooled and rendered less threatening by the symbolic juxtaposition of milk and poison"<sup>25</sup>.

Such generalizations of symbolic meaning are highly questionable. To me, it would make more sense to regard sexuality and passion as a sub-field within the medical discourses on cooling and heating, rather than explaining the later with the former. It even remains unclear whether Alter speaks about a specific, current, North Indian setting, about South Asia or Hinduism in general, or even about a human universal. To figure out if he has a point there, regarding a symbolic opposition, it is worthwhile to look at one story in which poison is actually used as a kind of anti-milk.

The *Harivaṃśa*, an appendix to the *Mahābhārata* corpus telling about the infant and the adolescent Kṛṣṇa, focuses on the many stratagems by which his uncle, king Kaṃsa, tries to get rid of him. Right at the beginning of this long story<sup>26</sup>, the evil king orders his wet-nurse (*dhātrī*) to give him her poisoned breasts (fig. 3)<sup>27</sup>. Pūtanā, as this evil breast feeder is called, here appears as an ominous *śakuni* bird, which might be a vulture, raven or kite:

(20) The ghastly *śakuni* bird named Pūtanā was a cause of fear in living beings. She came in the middle of the night, fiercely shaking her wings. (21) She placed herself on the axis of a cart. Bursting out (*ut-pīḍa*) and overflowing (*varṣa*) were the streams of her milk (*pra-snava*). In the night, she gave Kṛṣṇa her breast (*stana*), while the people were sleeping. (22) Kṛṣṇa drunk out her breast, but also her life. She screamed<sup>28</sup>.

A bird giving milk? Like in the murderous act of feeding milk to venerated cobras<sup>29</sup>, the religious and symbolic reality of milk as materialized motherhood transcends zoological realities. This bird seemingly has breasts, like some harpies: After her death, Putanā's corpse, still in the shape of the *śakuni* bird, is described as breastless (*vipayodharā*)<sup>30</sup>. Seeing this, the fosterparents of Kṛṣṇa are struck by terror:

<sup>25</sup> Alter 1992, 124.

<sup>26</sup> *Harivaṃśa* 50.19, own translation.

<sup>27</sup> The image is from *Bhagavat. The Krishna Avatar*, a special issue of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, which includes English and Hindi versions of mythological stories.

<sup>28</sup> *pūtanā nāma śakunī ghorā prāṇabhayaṃkarī | ājagāmārdharātre vai pakṣau krodhād vidhunvatī || 20 || nilīlye śakaṭākṣe sā prasnavotpīḍavarṣiṇī | dadau stanam ca kṛṣṇāya tatra suptajane niṣi || 21 || tasyāḥ stanam papau kṛṣṇaḥ prāṇaiḥ saha nanāda ca [...]* || 22 || (*Harivaṃśa* 50, own translation).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Lange (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> *Harivaṃśa* 50.23, own translation.



(26) Nanda went home, to [his wife] Yaśodā, and asked her: (27) “What is this? I do not understand, I am caught by this big surprise and fear about our son. I am totally scared!”

(28) Yaśodā answered, equally horrified: “Oh husband, I don’t know, I had the little one with me while I was sleeping! It was the sound that woke me up”<sup>31</sup>.

The later narrative of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* does not mention her being a bird or the wet-nurse of Kāṁsa, but instead gives some more detailed accounts of her nurse- or even motherhood towards Kṛṣṇa. Like in the older version, she is “sent by Kāṁsa, a terrible murderer of children, slaying children while roaming around cities, villages, cowsheds and elsewhere”<sup>32</sup>.

But then, when she abducted the baby and gave him the breasts, he sucked her dry, and lifelessly she fell to the ground! The people were happy to find Kṛṣṇa alive. Disgustedly, they went to burn Pūtanā’s dead body – and were astonished to find that:

(34) the smoke rising out of her body, while it was burnt, was fragrant like [smoke of] the *aguru* herb – as soon as [the body] was deformed (*nirbhukta*) by Kṛṣṇa, her evilness was crushed. (35) The *rākṣasī* Pūtanā, a bloodthirsty killer of children who wanted to destroy Kṛṣṇa, obtained a blessed state of existence for having offered him her breast. (36) Then, what about those “mothers” of Kṛṣṇa who, turned red [by motherly affection] and [moved] by believe (*śraddhā*) and devotion (*bhakti*), offer what is most dear to them to Kṛṣṇa, who is the supreme self<sup>33</sup>?

The “mothers” of Kṛṣṇa might include everyone who feels *vatsalaratī*, the maternal form of love, towards him. The example of Pūtanā shows that this emotion is, at least partially, identical with the milk flow triggered by it – in a foul-smelling<sup>34</sup>, evil-minded demoness no less than in a meek, mild and motherly

---

<sup>31</sup> *yaśodāṃ nandagopas tu papracchāgatasaṃbhramah || 26 || ko 'yaṃ vidhir na jānāmi vismayo me mahān ayam | putrasya me bhayaṃ bhīru bhīrutvaṃ amupāgatam || 27 || yaśodā tv abravīd bhītā nārya jānāmi kiṃ nv idam | dārakeṇa sahānena suptā śabdena bodhitā || 28 ||* (*Harivaṃśa* 50, own translation).

<sup>32</sup> *kāmsena prahitā ghorā pūtanā bāla-ghātinī | śiśūṃś cacāra nighnanū pura-grāma-vrajādiṣu* (*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10.6.2, own translation).

<sup>33</sup> *dahyamānasya dehasya dhūmaś cāguru-saurabhaḥ | utthitaḥ kṛṣṇa-nirbhukta-sapady āhata-pāpmanah || 34 || pūtanā loka-bāla-ghnī rākṣasī rudhirāśanā | jighāmsayāpi haraye stanam dattvāpa sad-gatim || 35 || kiṃ punaḥ śraddhayā bhaktyā kṛṣṇāya paramātmāne | yacchan priyatamaṃ kiṃ nu raktās tan-mātaro yathā || 36 ||* (*Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* 10.6.34-36, own translation).

<sup>34</sup> *Pūta* can mean “stinking”, but also “purified”.

cow. Surabhī, the “fragrant” cow-woman in fig. 2, so thoroughly represents an essentialized quality of goodness (*sattva*) that it can be smelled. But the simple act of breastfeeding is enough that her opposite, Pūtanā, also evaporates the fragrance (*saurabha*) of goodness, although she had acted out of wickedness (*pāp-man*). When even a good act out of evil intention is praiseworthy, asks the text, how can we imagine the goodness of those cows and other mothers who only care for Kṛṣṇa's best?

(38) Such a being full of evil and witchcraft (*yātu*) attained the heaven where good mothers go. What, then, about the motherlike (*anu-mātr*) cows who gave Kṛṣṇa the milk of their breasts to feed him?

(39) Whose streams of milk, flowing sufficiently out of love for a son (*putra-sneha*), the Lord drank, the son of Devakī, bestower of eternal perfection and the like, – (40) for those mothers, who continuously look at Kṛṣṇa as a son, the cycle of rebirth will not recombine itself anew, like it does for the ignorant ones<sup>35</sup>.

Although obtaining the boon of a good mother nourishing Kṛṣṇa, everyone's prototypical son<sup>36</sup>, the text makes quite clear that she is not really “mother-like” (*anumatr*), but instead full of wickedness (*yātu*). Unlike good mothers, she doesn't act out of piety (*śraddhā*) and devotion (*bhakti*), but as “a bloodthirsty demoness, a killer of children” (*bāla-ghnī rākṣasī rudhirāśanā*).

Until now, images and films portray her in such a disgusting way. As a striking example, in the 1988 TV series *Mahabhārat*, directed by Ravi Chopra, her role, ugly both of character and of appearance, is played by an apparently male actor (fig. 4)<sup>37</sup>. In Indian cinema, transvestite and transgender actors often play clownish or grotesque roles. In this case, the “manning” of Pūtanā's role is probably meant to increase her aspect as a bad mother, even an anti-mother – an ideal example to show how ideals of perfect motherhood tend to affirm stereotypes, suppression of deviance, and resentment against people who do not fit into the idealized category. A woman has no alternative to either fulfilling this ideal or falling into the category of the despised Pūtanā. Breastfeeding, inscribed by many Hindu myths as the most significant enactment of ideal motherhood,

<sup>35</sup> *yātudhāny api sāvargam avāpa janānī-gatim | kṛṣṇa-bhukta-stana-kṣīrāḥ kim u gāvo 'numātarāḥ || 38 || payāmsi yāsām apibat putra-sneha-snutāny alam | bhagavān devakī-putrāḥ kaivalyādy-akhilapradāḥ || 39 || tāsām aviratam kṛṣṇe kurvatīnām sutekṣaṇam | na punaḥ kalpate rājan samsāro 'jñāna-sambhavaḥ || 40 ||* (own translation).

<sup>36</sup> In his adolescent form, Kṛṣṇa is also everyone's prototypical lover; cf. Lange 2017a, Toomey 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Film still taken from Episode 12, minute 36; <https://youtu.be/2Ge9AWkl-MVA?t=2172>, accessed on 17.01.2019.

therefore has a dark side: Whoever is unable or unwilling to give milk to a “calf” or baby might be associated with the demoness who indeed does give her breast, but a poisoned one. Isn’t the text even implying that it is better to give a poisoned breast than no breast at all?

I do not want to indulge myself too deep into speculative interpretation, although even unfalsifiable propositions can be of interest. Psychoanalysis, especially its Kleinian strand, might use this story as some proof for the ambiguousness of breastfeeding and the breast itself as the first object of a slowly emerging individual consciousness. In his *Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, Sudhir Kakar follows Melanie Klein to some extent, stating that:

“the secret fantasy of poisoned milk, of nourishment that kills, originates early in life when the decisive separation between child and mother takes place. The elevation of this fantasy, which is occasionally encountered clinically, to the status of myth for a whole culture indicates the intensity of inner conflict associated with this separation in the Indian setting”<sup>38</sup>.

Is this the reason that the demoness makes such an obscene, bizarre and shocking impression? Does she even make this impression, within and beyond South Asian media?

Anthropological structuralism, on the other hand, would also make use of the ambiguous relation between poison and milk, which indeed plays a huge role in many Hindu myths and rituals (cf. Lange 2017) – these poles might be interpreted as the forces and materials of “nature”, usable by and dangerous to cultivation. Milk and Poison (like blood and other bodily fluids) might also symbolize the powerful forces of our own spiritual and physical “life”, which can be sucked out from our bodies, or given by us, either with the intention to nourish or strengthen someone else – or to kill. To drive this interpretation even further, we might follow Mary Douglas’ thoughts elaborated in *Purity and Danger*, wherein the body with its fluids and orifices is universalized as an ideological model of and for society. Poison on the orifice by which the body/society nourishes an infant body, e.g. its own future, might then be read as a contamination of the very roots of the values on which human life and society is founded. All of these interpretations have their own right and do provide us with new possibilities, emic and etic, how to read motherhood through the lens of the myth and vice versa.

---

<sup>38</sup> Kakar 1978, 147.

Apart from social norms, expectations and restraints, another dark side of breastfeeding lies in the biology of lactation, which might be painful, insufficient, or denied by a child. Especially in circumstances when this was life-threatening, demonesses like Pūtanā and their mythology have much more emotional significance. They are far-spread, and often their stories are directly intertwined with ritual acts to prevent the danger or to heal the disease. In 1890, Heinrich von Wlislöcki conducted ethnographic fieldwork among Transylvanian Roma travelers. There, he came across the belief that hostile “Earth Women” (*pçuvushi*) either give their own milk to human children, causing them to reject the mother's breast, or let their own children suck dry a human breast, causing hypogalactorrhea. For both cases, Wlislöcki reports the use of onion fomentations on the breasts, made potent by reciting a spell:

“Pçuvushi, Pçuvushi, may disease devour you!  
Your milk shall be fire, may you burn within the earth!  
Run and run, milk of mine, run and run, white milk,  
Run and run as long as I want – feed my baby”<sup>39</sup>!

The Romani text of this spell strikes me with its many words derivable from Sanskrit words: *naś*, “to decay, wither, waste away”; *antar*, “within”; *dugdha*, “milk”; others are related with current Hindī words, such as *mera*, “mine”; *tera*, “yours”; and *dūdh*, “milk”. Being of Middle Indian descent, Romani *tçud* fits well in between Old Indian *dugdha* and New Indian *dūdh* – still, that the word for milk has remained stable on its long journey does not mean that the poisoned milk as a motive derives from India. This practice is, after all, a European practice, and has as much resemblance to European motives as to South Asian myths. For instance, the “long-titted” *Langtüttin* from South Tyrol is said to be after children to offer them her monstrous breasts, of which one is filled with milk and the other one with poison or pus<sup>40</sup>.

In such myths and rituals, the medical becomes ideological as soon as diseases are explained by greed and envy as causes for a mother's or her child's suffering. If there is anything linking the motives of pestilent mother's milk all over the world, it is a patriarchal distrust of women who do not fit into the role of caring and devotion, which is attributed to motherhood. Any liberating act,

---

<sup>39</sup> Wlislöcki (1890), 100; my translation from German. The Romanī lyrics are also given:

*Pçuvushi, Pçuvushi / Ac tu nāshvāyi! / Tiro tçud ac yākhā, / Andre pçuv tu pçabuvá!*

*Thávda, thávda miro tçud, / Thávda, thávda párho tçud, / Thávda, thávda, sár kámáv; M're cáveske bokhále!*

<sup>40</sup> Hoffmann-Krayer, Bächtold-Stäubli 1927-1942, 282. The German word *eiter* had earlier been a word for “poison”, nowadays it mainly denotes “pus”.

transgressing a mother's relatively constrained field of activity, might be read as the "greed" and "envy" causing harm to their surroundings, especially to the children. Of course, not only women are victims of such a hunt for witches. Many middle European stories have snakes and toads as contaminators of milk, if they don't accuse "the Jews" to kill children by poison<sup>41</sup>. More often than not, misogyny interweaves with other forms of bigotry.

The greed, envy, ire or agitation, believed to contaminate the milk might be ascribed to some external agent, like a demoness or witch, but also to a mother herself. Throughout Europe, mother's milk is or has been thought to influence and build the temperament of a child; therefore, she should not be excited or angry during breastfeeding<sup>42</sup>. This relates to South Asian beliefs in the evil eye (*burī nazar*), whose harmful effects (*doṣ*) do not need to be intentional and may even be caused by excessive affection of a mother towards her child<sup>43</sup> – adding one more layer of complexity and ambiguousness to the highly charged semantics of motherhood.

### *Lactation and emotion as a Hindu-religious theme*

With the story of Pūtanā in mind, it is possible to partly accept Alter's statement that "poison is the symbolic opposite of milk". Myths about poisoned breasts set the giving and the taking of life into a relation to each other. The *samudra-manthan*, the churning of the milk ocean, not only brings forth *amṛt*, the nectar of immortality, but in many accounts also a poison potent enough to annihilate the world, named *Kālakuṭa* oder *Hālāhala*<sup>44</sup>. Until now, this myth feeds pro-verbs and common imageries, as in a modern play written by Asgar Vajahat, who has no one less than Mahatma Gandhi, saying to Nehru: "I know that I speak bitter words. Such a speech can taste like poison, but it is *amṛt*"<sup>45</sup>. A more direct reference to the *samudramanathan* myth is given by a proverb in the Braj language, preserved in the *Nīti Satasāi*, the "700 verses" composed in Dhaka around 1704 by the poet Vrind:

---

<sup>41</sup> Hoffmann-Krayer, Bächtold-Stäubli 1927-1942; Ermarcora 2017.

<sup>42</sup> "Die Mutterm[ilch] hat auf die Gemütsart des Kindes großen Einfluss; die Mutter darf während des Stillens nicht aufgeregter oder zornig sein" (Hoffmann-Krayer, Bächtold-Stäubli 1927-1942, 287).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Pocock 1992.

<sup>44</sup> Stubbe-Diarra 1995.

<sup>45</sup> "*Maiṃ jāntā hūṃ ki maiṃ bahut kaḍvī bāt kah rahā hūṃ. Aisī bāt to zahar lag sakī hai. Par hai vah amṛt*" (Asgar Vajahat, *Goḍse@gāndhī.com*, third scene).

“Though they be kindred, [people's] natures are various: Poison kills, nectar revives, [though] they're born in the same place”<sup>46</sup>.

For re-focusing this dualism on mothering practices, Ermacora's collection of material on milk-drinking snakes is quite useful. Flemish tapestries from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, give an interesting account on the milk of goats, supposedly stolen by snakes and replaced by poison. These sources “stress, apparently, the ingratitude of the reptile in respect of the milk-giving animal: ‘for milk, poison’ or ‘poison instead of milk’ (*pro lacte venenum*)”<sup>47</sup>.

However, nothing of this indicates a semantics of milk as “the symbolic opposite of erotic passion”, as Alter puts it in the quote at the beginning of chapter 2, thus equating the latter with poison. Rather, Hindu myths and rituals conceptualize breastfeeding as a unity of emotional and bodily binding. As a bodily junction, driven by lust and equipped with risks, fears and dangers, it could indeed be compared to and contrasted with adult sexuality – but, in fact, this is not what the myths and rituals do. Juxtaposing poison and milk, medical herbs and mountains, cows and snakes, the *samudramanthan* myth sheds light on cosmology as well as on individual health, in a bodily sense as well as in emotional and spiritual senses. Rather than to presume universal sexual drives or other psychological archetypes behind such concurrences of motives, as Alter seems to suggest, this constellation can only be analysed as a metaphorical phenomenon, rooted in discourse and in connotations established in languages. The longevity of this knot of associations is explainable by the stability of ritual performances as an enactment of cultural memory, steadily recurring to myths, thereby keeping the mythological as well as the ritual knowledge around.

Ritual substances, prominently those of bovine provenance, may be used for feeding, for bathing or for anointing a deity. Such acts as the besmearing, *abhiṣeka*, with milk can express motherly devotion to a god. Regarding Kṛṣṇa, who, as mentioned earlier, is a recipient of motherly affection not only of female devotees, this ritual element is preconfigured in classical myth texts and affirms the lasting relevance of these narrations:

(58) Then, Indra took the pots filled with heavenly water (*divya-payas*) and performed an *abhiṣeka* for Kṛṣṇa, the “cow-finder” (*go-vinda*). (59) As they watched him being sprinkled (*abhi-sic*), the cows, who are the com-

---

<sup>46</sup> “*Jadapi mahodar hoyā to u prakṛti aur ki aur / bis mārai, jyāvai sudhā, upajai ekahi ṭhaur*” (quoted in Rupert Snells introduction into *Braj Bhāṣā*).

<sup>47</sup> Ermacora 2017, 68.

panions of their herds, also sprinkled (*sic*) immortal Kṛṣṇa with their teats, out of which the milk gushed forth<sup>48</sup>.

In this context, wherein “self-milking cows”<sup>49</sup> are a powerful symbol for worship, the act rather than the mind brings forth religious merit. Even the evil demoness is glorified for the sheer gesture of breastfeeding Kṛṣṇa, irrespective of her intention.

Rather than an intentional act, the offering of milk appears to be a bodily reaction to a religious emotion – if not spirituality and its embodiment are not altogether the same. Mooing in the background of this Hindu image of how things are stands Pṛthivī, the cow who is the Earth. Even she had to be stimulated to pour out the food for her earthling children.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alter J.S., 1992, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley.
- Das V., 1993, *Der Anthropologische Diskurs über Indien. Die Vernunft und ihr Anderes*, in M. Fuchs, B. Eberhard (eds.), *Kultur, soziale Praxis, Text. Die Krise der ethnographischen Repräsentation*, Frankfurt, 402-425.
- Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi G., 1987, *The Self-Milking Cow and the Bleeding Lingam*, Wiesbaden.
- Ermacora D., 2017, *The comparative milk-suckling reptile*, «Anthropozoologica» 52/1, 59-81.
- Hoffmann-Krayer E., Bächtold-Stäubli H., 1927-1942, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, Berlin.
- Kakar S., 1978, *The Inner World. A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, Delhi.
- Lange G., 2017a, *Säfte und Kräfte. Körperflüssigkeiten als Metapher in altindischen Mythen und anderen Erzählungen*, Marburg.
- Lange G., 2017b, *Rās-Līlā. Ein Spiel der Leidenschaften*, in E. Franke (ed.), *Objekte erzählen Religionsgeschichte(n)*, Marburg, 30-49.

---

<sup>48</sup> *tataḥ śakras tu tān gr̥hya ghaṭān divyapayodharān | abhiṣekeṇa govindam yojayāmāsa yogavit || 58 || dṛṣṭvā tam abhiṣicyantaṁ gāvas tāḥ saha yūthapaiḥ | stanaiḥ prasnavasamyuktaiḥ siṣicuḥ kṛṣṇam avyayam || 36 || (Harivaṁśa 62.58-59, own translation).*

<sup>49</sup> Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi 1987.

- Lange G., forthcoming, *Pañcagavya, die fünf Produkte der Kuh. Ein Beitrag zur Stofflichkeit, Sinnlichkeit und Zärtlichkeit der Interaktion von Menschen mit Hindu-Gottheiten*, in *Religionen - Medien – Strategien*, Berlin.
- Michaels A., 2006, *Hinduism. Past and Present*, Princeton.
- Pasche Guignard F., 2016, *Reading Hindu Devotional Poetry through Maternal Theory. Maternal Thinking and Maternal Figures in Bhakti Poetry of Sūrdās*, in V. Reimer (ed.), *Angels on Earth. Mothering, Religion and Spirituality*, Bradford, 163-180.
- Pocock D.F., 1992, *The Evil Eye. Envy and Greed Among the Patidar of Central Gujarat*, in A. Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye: A Casebook*, 201-210.
- Snell, R., undated, *Braj in Brief. An introduction to literary Braj Bhāṣā*, <http://hindiurduflagship.org/assets/pdf/Braj-in-Brief.pdf>, last access 13.03.2019.
- Stubbe-Diarra I., 1995, *Die Symbolik von Gift und Nektar in der klassischen indischen Literatur*, Wiesbaden.
- Toomey P.M., 1990, *Krishna's Consuming Passions. Food as a Metaphor and Metonym for Emotion at Mount Govardhan*, in O.M. Lynch (ed.), *Divine Passions. The Social Construction of Emotion in India*, Berkeley, 157-182.
- Wislocki H., 1890, *Vom wandernden Zigeunervolke. Bilder aus den Leben der Siebenburger Zigeuner. Geschichtliches, Ethnologisches, Sprache und Poesie*, Hamburg.
- Brhadaraṇyaka-Upaṇiṣad* (9.-6. ct. BCE)  
My translation from [http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1\\_sanskr/1\\_veda/4\\_upa/brupsb2u.htm](http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/1_veda/4_upa/brupsb2u.htm), last access 13.03.2019.
- Mahābhārata* (3. ct. BCE - 3. ct. CE)  
My translation from [http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1\\_sanskr/2\\_epic/mbh/mbh\\_01\\_u.htm](http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/2_epic/mbh/mbh_01_u.htm), last access 13.03.2019.
- Harivaṃśa* (3. ct. BCE - 3. ct. CE)  
My translation from [http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1\\_sanskr/2\\_epic/mbh/ext/hv\\_conpu.htm](http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/2_epic/mbh/ext/hv_conpu.htm), last access 13.03.2019.
- Skanda-Purāṇa* (6.-9. ct. CE)  
*The Skanda Purāṇa. Part I. Translated and Annotated by Dr. G.V.Tagare*, Delhi 1992.
- Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (6.-10. ct. CE)  
My translation from [http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1\\_sanskr/3\\_purana/bhagp/bhp\\_10u.htm](http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/3_purana/bhagp/bhp_10u.htm), last access 13.03.2019.
- Gaṇeśapurāṇa* (14.-16. ct. CE).  
*Gaṇeśapurāṇa. Part II: Kṛīḍākhaṇḍa. Translations, Notes and Index by Greg Bailey*. Wiesbaden, 2008.
- Godse@gāndhī.com (contemporary play by Asgar Vajahat, undated)  
<http://www.hindisamay.com/asgar-vazahat/natak/godse@gandhi-dot-com.htm>.







*Fig. 1. God Kṛṣṇa in human baby shape, together with his brother Balrām as butter thieves (Makhan Chor). Typical poster, bought in summer 2015 in Lambgaon, Uttarākhaṇḍ.*



*Fig. 2. Kāmadhenu, the "fulfiller of what is desired", alongside the "fragrant" cow-woman Surābhī. Typical poster, bought in summer 2015 in Lambgaon, Uttarākhaṇḍ.*

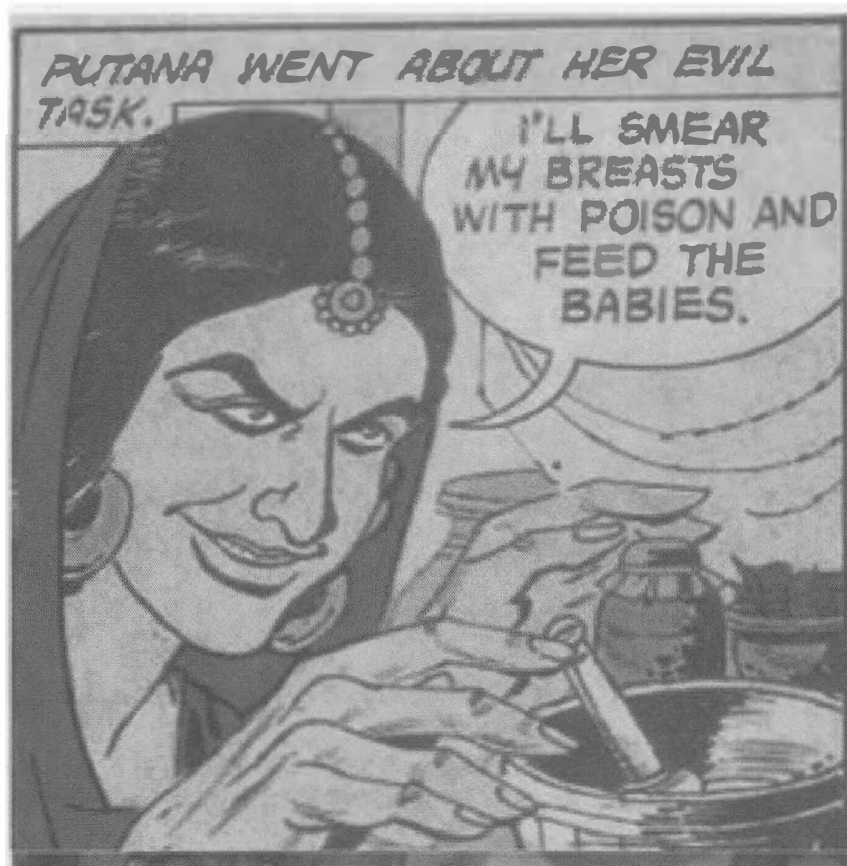


Fig. 3. Pūtana in *Bhagavat. The Krishna Avatar*, a special issue of the comic series *Amar Chitra Katha*, which includes English and Hindi versions of mythological stories.



Fig. 4. Pūtana in the 1988 TV series *Mahabhārat*, directed by Ravi CHOPRA. Film still taken from Episode 12, minute 36; <https://youtu.be/2Ge9AWklMV4?t=2172>, accessed on 17.01.2019.