

SESSION 1 : MILK AND ORIGINS: MILK OF MAN, MILK OF THE GODS

Presided by Jean-Denis Vigne

Divine Milk: Cosmogony, Sacrifice and Rebirth in Hinduism

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Pastoral nomads who reached the banks of the Indus at the start of the second millennium BCE, the Aryan tribes made the cow a central fertility symbol. The sacrificial rites described in the Veda and its liturgical commentaries, the Brahmanas, attest to the widespread use of dairy products in worship.

Many cosmogonic myths form a web of correspondences between milk and light, whiteness, dawn and fertilizing waters. There is fascination with the fact that just-drawn milk is amazing the only naturally “cooked” substance. The milk’s warmth is attributed to the action of Agni - the fire god, messenger between mortals and the gods through rituals -, because he put his seed into cows. Associated with the heat of the sun that permits the cosmos to exist, the warmth of milk makes it the ideal offering, *agnihotra*, that can be presented at any time and any place, in a domestic or ritual context.

Soma, an intoxicating and hallucinogenic beverage that has the reputation of causing death and rebirth, producing divine ecstasy, is often referred to as “milk” in the Vedic texts. As for *amrita*, the nectar of immortality comparable to the Greek ambrosia, ingesting it is a divine privilege opposing it to milk, the drink of mortals. Thus milk in the Vedic religion is associated with a vast symbolic web that pertains both to cooking and beverages.

By the action of churning, through which religious ideas are also exercised, milk produced ritual butter, a necessary ingredient in many ceremonial acts, the use of which has extended into historic and contemporary Hinduism. As the quintessence of milk obtained through processing, it is a particularly valued offering. But it also symbolizes the inner task of formulation that is accomplished by the poet-seers who composed the Vedic hymns, putting into human words the divine inspiration they received:

“Words flow together like rivers,
becoming clearer in the heart via the mind.
These streams of ghee disperse
like gazelles fleeing before the hunter.
(Rig Veda, IV, 58, 6).

The myths surrounding the figure of Krishna as cow master equally value dairy products, in particular butter. The holy child is taken in and protected from the murderous folly of his uncle by pastoralists living in a clearing where the “flic flac of the butter churns” can be heard as well as the “splashing of whey,” where “the entire earth is damp with water from yogurt,” where the air “smells of melted butter” (Harivamsha 48, 24-26). It is a true paradise such as one finds in cosmologies. The mischievous hero stuffed himself on precious substances and the milkmaids lamented: “I have not a drop of milk left, no whey, no melted butter, no yogurt!” The Krishna myth thus celebrates the manifestation of a divine presence for whom the world is a playground and who answers to the name of Gopâla, the herdsman, king, keeper of the cows and Brahminical values.

The myth of churning the Ocean of Milk is part of the cycle of Vishnu as protector and restorer of dharma, the cosmic order, through his ability to descend into the world to save it by calling up shapes of himself or avatâras. The Mahabharata, Ramayana and Purânas tell of the rivalry between Devas, the gods, and the Asuras, the “demons” that competed in their quest for *amrita*, the drink of immortality: universal royalty would go to those who obtain it. But first it had to be brought up from the depths of the



primordial ocean. Mount Mandara, one of the four pillars of the world, was wrested from its base to be used as a churning rod; the serpent Vāsuki, lord of the underworld, served as a rope: pulling alternately on it, gods and demons gave rhythm to the watery expanse. But Mount Mandara, having no foundation, “slipped” and the churning would have failed had it not been for Vishnu who, taking the form of a giant turtle, dove into the ocean and supported the mountain on his shell. The churning could then continue and out of it all sorts of treasures sprang: amrita, Sṛī-Lakshmī the goddess of fortune, the fertilizing monsoon, the royal horse, the cow Surabhi, promise of abundance, etc.

This myth spread throughout the sub-continent and beyond into South East Asia. It is related to focal issues for these cultures: cosmic order and disorder, the cyclical structure of time that requires periods of destruction and recreation, and a constant preoccupation with restoring harmony. In this regard, it attests to a great fidelity to the values of sacrifice in Vedic thought.

Thus, through the myths and rituals in which dairy products play a part as well as the traditional methods by which they are processed, [Hinduism expresses basic aspects of its worldview](#).

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