



HAF Policy Brief: Hinduism and the Ethical Treatment of Animals

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and the vast majority of Hinduism's leading *sampradayas* (traditions) regard the ethical treatment of animals as fundamental to the core Hindu belief that the Divine exists in all living beings, both human and non-human, and *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, the whole world is one family. Animals and plants are not regarded as mere objects for wanton human use and consumption in the Hindu tradition. Rather, they are equally embodied with the existence of the Divine and are fully deserving of respect and human compassion.

Hinduism, the world's oldest living religion, is a rich collection of hundreds of spiritual and philosophical traditions followed throughout Asia for more than 5,000 years. Amongst these traditions are some of the earliest teachings promoting the ethical treatment of animals, the basis of which stems from the concepts of *karma* and reincarnation; *ahimsa* or non-injury; and the understanding that the Divine exists as a soul in all living beings, both human and non-human. Despite differences in intelligence and ability amongst varying life forms, the existence of the soul in all forms binds all of existence and demands peaceful, respectful coexistence amongst humans, animals and other elements of nature.

In the Hindu epic *Mahabharat*, Lord Krishna, who chastises his cousin for carelessly chopping down a tree to release pent up anger, states, "Humans should take from this planet only that which is necessary for our survival." He continues to explain that when societies begin to violate this principle, all of humanity will be forced to face the repercussions as all life is interconnected and serves its unique purpose in the world. Ultimately, there are serious karmic repercussions for taking an innocent life, causing unnecessary suffering and/or pain to another life form, as well as idly supporting such suffering and pain in some form. Accordingly, it is not only the man who kills the cow at a slaughterhouse who reaps some degree of negative karma, but also those involved in every step of the process, including the final consumers of the beef.

Given the Hindu teaching of *karma*, *samsara* and *ahimsa*, vegetarianism is a common practice among many followers of Hinduism, and Hindus make up the largest percentage of vegetarians in the world today. While not all Hindus are vegetarian, those who choose to refrain from meat do so in order to refrain from taking part in violence against animals. Lay Hindus are given more leniency in their diets, however spiritual leaders, such as swamis, sadhus, and gurus, are almost always strictly vegetarian, and most Hindu temples do not allow meat products on their premises. The Hindu advocacy of vegetarianism stems from a variety of reasons such as environmental concerns, health, but most of all from the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence).

In the U.S., animals raised for meat consumption are not only killed, but are treated inhumanely throughout their ill-fated lives. Animals are regarded as simply food which, in turn, allows one to handle the animals as objects, rather than living beings with divine souls. Objectifying animals thus leads to the justification of treating animals disrespectfully because they are simply objects "owned" by humans. As such, both the inhumane treatment of animals being raised for consumption as well as the actual slaughter of the animal would be considered violations of *ahimsa* and *dharma*. While vegetarianism is not required of all Hindus, some branches of Hinduism consider vegetarianism a core virtue. In general, abstaining from meat consumption is widely encouraged.

Ancient Hindu ritual and scripture in some instances call for sacrifice. For a marginal minority of Hindu sects, this translates into the practice of animal sacrifice. While this has occurred throughout history, and continues to be practiced by a rare few today, the vast majority of Hindus do not partake in, nor do they condone, animal sacrificing rituals. Most Hindus carry out their sacrifice to the Divine using foods like fruit, grains and clarified



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butter, and through austerity measures such as fasting. While we recognize that animal sacrifice is a practice that occurs in a minority of Hindu sects, HAF adamantly condemns such violence.

Textual Commentary on the Ethical Treatment of Animals

"He who does not seek to cause the sufferings of bonds and death to living creatures, (but) desires the good of all (beings), obtains endless bliss. He who does not injure any (creature) attains without an effort what he thinks of, what he undertakes, and what he fixes his mind on." (*Manu-samhita 5.46-47*)

"By not killing any living being, one becomes fit for salvation." (*Manu-samhita 6.60*)

"Deer, camel, donkey, monkey, rats, creeping animals, birds and flies - one should consider them like one's own children, and not differentiate between one's children and these creatures." (*Bhagavata Purana 7.14.9*)

"He should not satiate his hunger and thirst without first giving water and grains to his animals." (*Vishnu Dharma Sutra 63.18*)

"The ascetic should live the life of a bee, accepting little alms from several homes, so that he does not burden any particular home too much, and take only that much which fulfills his hunger. A clever man takes the essence from multiple sources and scriptures, just as the bee extracts nectar from several flowers." (*Bhagavata Purana 11.8.9-10*)

"The ascetic calls these animals as his teachers." (*Bhagavata Purana 11.9.24*)

"He who kills harmless and non-violent creatures for his own pleasure will never get true happiness, whether in this life, or after he dies." (*Manu Smriti 5.45 - Vishnu Dharma Sutra 51.68*)

"He who does not seek to kill, cause pain or tie up living creatures and desires the good of all attains everlasting joy." (*Manu Smriti 5.46 - Vishnu Dharma Sutra 51.69*)

"Meat can never be obtained without injury to living creatures, and injury to sentient beings is detrimental to the attainment of heavenly bliss; let him therefore shun the use of meat." (*Manu Smriti 5.48 - Vishnu Dharma Sutra 51.71*)