

## Portraits of the Celebrated Orphans: The Sacred Cows of *Vasubaras*

By Aparna Maladkar (2018)

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While in Kolhapur, I had the opportunity to witness the worship of cows in a *panjarpole* on the auspicious *Vasubaras* day. Following a fortunate tip, *Aai* (mom) and I rushed to Panjarpol Sanstha late that evening. Born and brought up in Kolhapur, I had never had the opportunity to witness this festival of *Vasubaras* before, and so I looked forward with anticipation on that first day of Diwali for celebration and adoration of the humble cows, and that too in a '*panjarpole*', a sanctuary that cares for animals in distress, those that are sick, and those that do not belong to anybody. *Vasubaras* is dedicated to the cows and their calves to symbolise the concept of motherhood. Married women, therefore, worship them on the day, and families worship them as a symbol of wealth as they believe her to be '*Kamdhenu*' or the mythological divine cow, one that fulfils all desires.



The Krishna temple in the courtyard and the first Celebrity peeping through the crowds

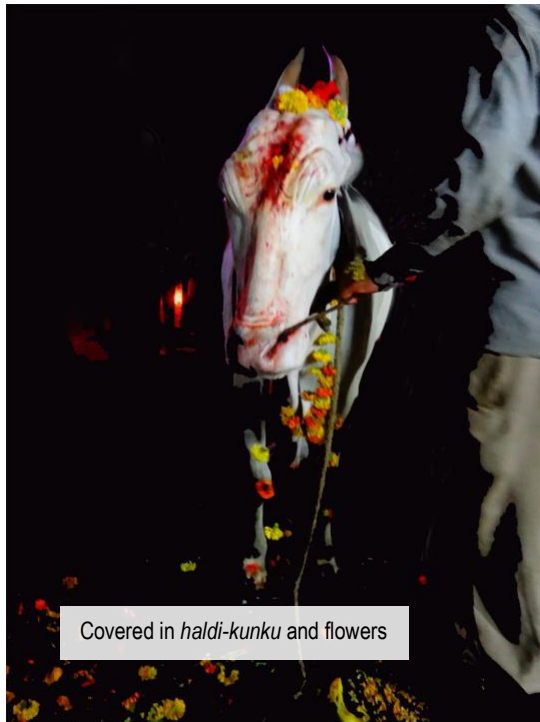
It was quite dark as *Aai* and I walked through the four-pointed-arched gateway into the open courtyard flooded with families keen to pay their respects to the cows and calves. The night glowed with little *aartis* (oil and ghee-soaked lamps) and bright tiny dots and combined fragrances of various *agarbattis* (incense sticks). From the arched gate, I had a clear view of the little temple of Lord Krishna sitting at the centre of the courtyard decorated with bright Diwali lights. We left our shoes by the arch amidst a sea of other shoes, and entered bare feet into the courtyard.



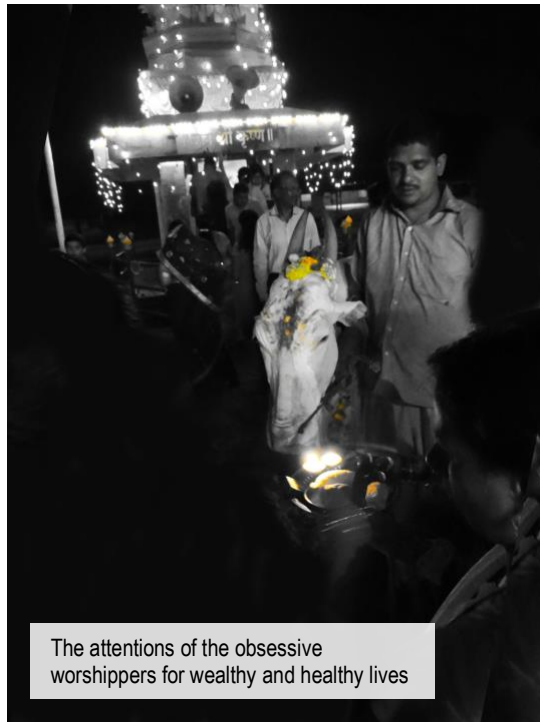
Portrait of the first orphan Celebrity Cow

I come across the first cow being worshipped vehemently, and it is difficult to get a close view of her as there are hordes of people, especially married women, surrounding the cow. She looks beautiful; glowing milky white in the darkness, standing tall and strong. The women first pour water on her feet, and her muscle twitches as she feels the touch of coldness against her legs and hooves in the cold night. This is followed by applying *haldi* and *kunku* (turmeric and vermilion powders) to her sweeping forehead, which is already liberally covered in yellow and

red powders. A few garlands and flowers are thrown at her already heavily garlanded neck, which she bears stoically. Finally, *aarti* lamps are waved around her head in clockwise direction and she is fed sweets like *puranpoli* and *pedhas*.



Covered in *haldi-kunku* and flowers

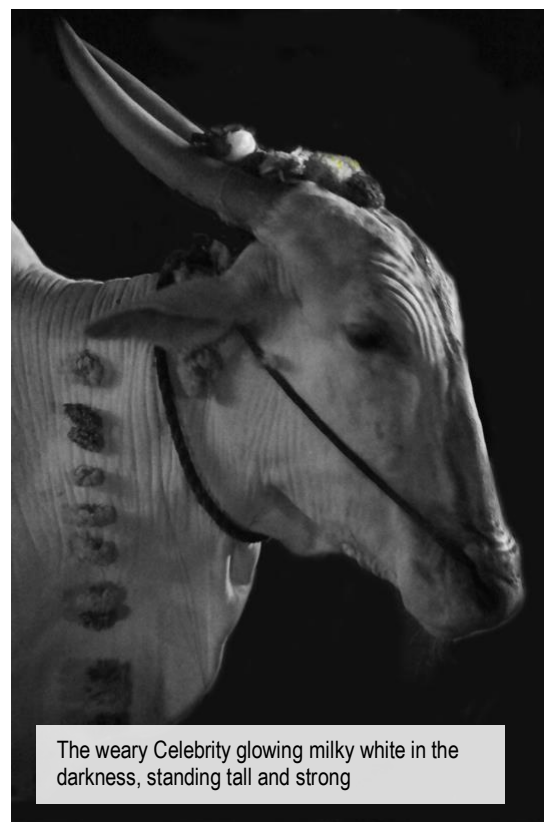


The attentions of the obsessive worshippers for wealthy and healthy lives



Anxious wait for the next ardent

The cow looks stressed as she is made to eat sugary sweets by every worshipper, as the kids run around her trying to touch and feel parts of her body. Her tail swishes but she is unable to swat away the kids as she is firmly held in place by the attendant. The worshipping family looks happy as they believe they are blessed with health and wealth, and their wishes will come true. They now turn their attention to Krishna in the temple who they believe will bestow similar blessings on the family.



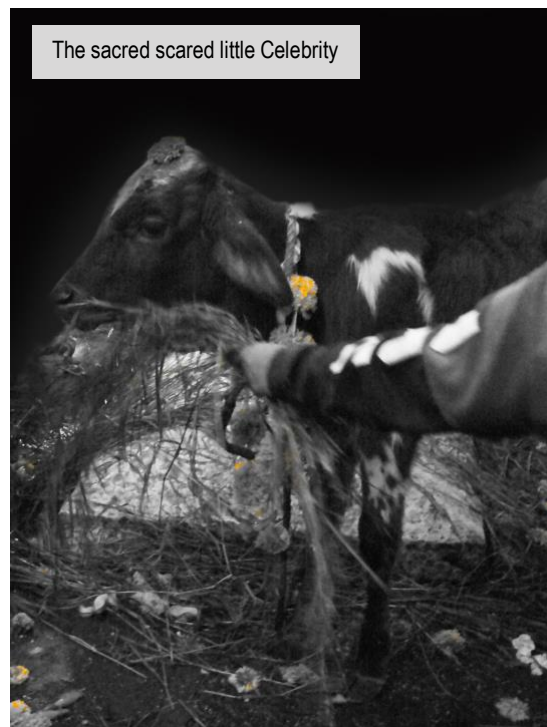
The weary Celebrity glowing milky white in the darkness, standing tall and strong

As I stand next in line to meet the cow, I watch her doleful eyes looking at me, wondering whether I will pour cold water on her exhausted feet, or smear her forehead with powders, or force feed her. Instead, I stick my camera in her face and take photos of the sad looking and very tired celebrity, the orphan that people seem fervently to remember on this auspicious day. Is this a form of Fatigued Cattle Syndrome, I wonder? Research shows that cows are social animals, have a greater emotional depth, and are known to get stressed, all of which has an impact on their milk productivity.<sup>1</sup> Main stress triggers for cattle can include separation from each, and fear from handling, restraint, neglect, bright colours, unfamiliar objects or shadows, and noise.<sup>2</sup>

Having had my fill of the cow's time, I look around the courtyard and see a couple more cows being obsessively worshipped. Every cow has about 20-30 people worshipping around them, and I realise that the attendants are rotating cows and calves from the sheds surrounding the courtyard. It's a long-drawn cycle of worship with one fatigued cow out and one new cow in. Every family wants to get a piece of the cow who will bless them with wealthy and healthy lives.



The innocent Calf pondering, "Why am I being covered in haldi-kunku and flowers?"



The sacred scared little Celebrity

I see a couple of covering calves tied near the temple and head their way. They look utterly distressed and sacred out of their wits. The sacred, scared, innocent calf does not understand the fanaticism of its worshippers, the keenness of the people to touch every part of its body, or the reckless need to cover it head to toe

<sup>1</sup> Velten, H., 2011. *The Emotional Depth Of A Cow*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jul/07/cows-best-friends#:~:text=Yes%2C%20cows%3B%20those%20creatures%20that,and%20get%20stressed%20when%20separated.>> [Accessed 5 June 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Spain, K., 2016. *Recognizing The Triggers Of Cattle Stress*. [online] Progressive Cattle. Available at: <<https://www.progressivecattle.com/topics/herd-health/recognizing-the-triggers-of-cattle-stress>> [Accessed 5 June 2020].



in *haldi* and *kunku*. All it cares about is trying to find its mother. It looks tired from mooing and has now quietened into a deadpan silence, praying that this most auspicious tradition, an ordeal will soon end.



Fragrant *agarbattis* glowing around the courtyard



Late into the night, the adored Cow wonders, "Can no one notice my distress?"



Sorry, off duty now, resting in the shed



All I long for is some peace and quiet after a long

I turn around to meet the cows in the sheds, where their majestic horns are outlined against the dimness of the night. They look shocked by the attention of the large number of worshippers trying to excessively feed them rich foods freshly made in their homes for Diwali. Some have just finished their turn in the courtyard and simply want to rest quietly, a few turn away from me, and others just hope they can ignore me.



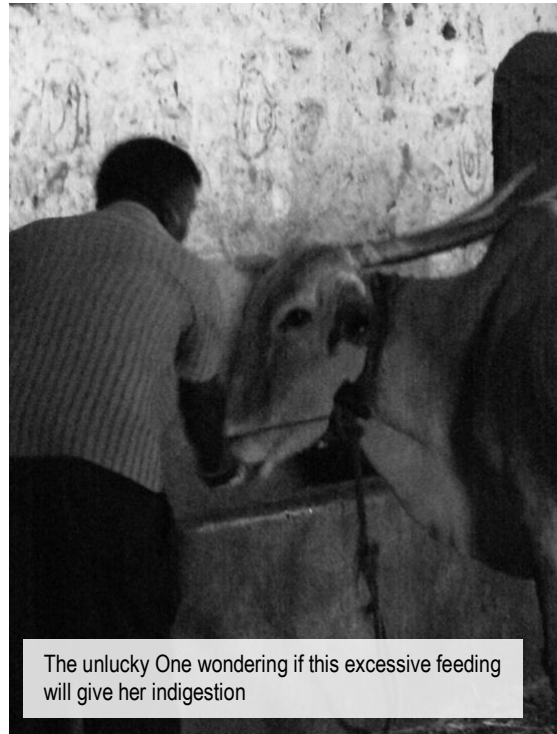
The One that turned away from me



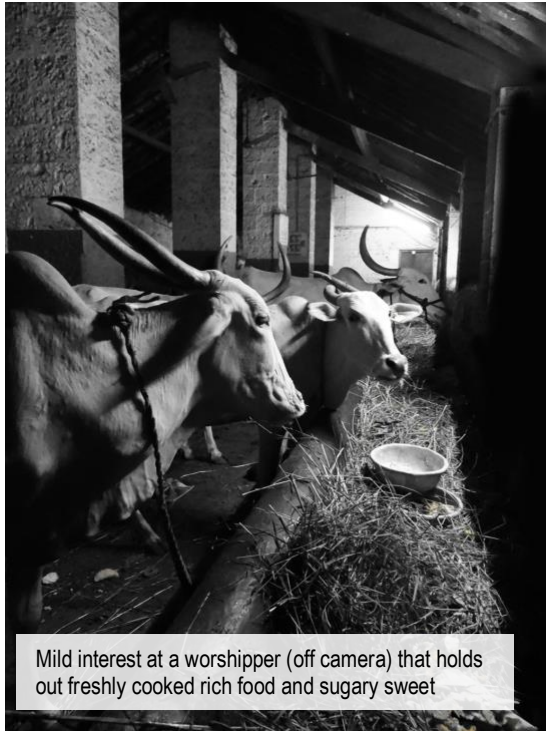
The One trying to hide in the shed



The surprised Ones wondering if I will force feed them



The unlucky One wondering if this excessive feeding will give her indigestion



Mild interest at a worshipper (off camera) that holds out freshly cooked rich food and sugary sweet



Leave us alone, please!

As I steady my camera in their faces, they look at me in surprise and I wonder if another piece of cooked food will give them indigestion? They try to get away from me, another crazy worshipper they think, the consequence of which is grainy and noisy portraits. As it gets late, there is no respite for them as multitudes are still thronging in to worship them: the most sacred of all animals in India. In this sanctuary for animals in distress, in a rush to attain their blessings, the psychological distress of these orphaned cows goes unnoticed, and their well-being takes a back seat.



Perhaps if we huddle (I mean, herd) together, we can fend off the worshippers?



Nowhere to escape



In Hinduism, the cow is thought to be the epitome of generosity in sustaining human life. This sacrifice is celebrated with utmost enthusiasm throughout the country on this day. As I look at the dignity of the cow, her patience and tolerance, I recognise that this quality of acceptance is the key to her holiness, which each one of us needs to embody in our own lives. I look at *Aai*, and she looks as exhausted as the cows. So we decide to leave, hoping that the adored cows find some peace at the end of this long night. The attendant decides to rotate the cow, and a perceptive elderly woman next to me proclaims happily to the cow, "Poor girl, now you can rest for a while!"

