

DUNG, DIVINITY AND DEMOCRACY:
TRACING THE COW IN
INDIAN FOLK ART, RITUAL AND THE WORK OF SHEELA GOWDA

by

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s internationally renowned Indian artist Sheela Gowda exchanged oil paint for cow-dung. This dramatic shift occurred in response to the rise in Hindu fundamentalism and as way to voice her distress at the violence of the Hindu / Muslim riots. From a euro-centric art-historical perspective, adopting cow-dung to create art may seem like a radical move, but in India it is a material rich in multi layered histories and one resonating with ritual, economic and gendered subtexts and overtones. This thesis analyzes Gowda's multi-coded artworks in an attempt to render more visible an artist who is an important contributor to the international contemporary art scene, to render viable arts usually considered marginal, minor or folk, and to balance an art historical canon which still favours the "high arts" as well as white, western or male artists. It argues not only for the validity of art in its many forms, but also for art historical scholarship which functions as bridge to forge meaning and open up dialogue between artists, viewers, critics and curators.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I have in a very unscholarly fashion decided to vary my spelling of various Sanskrit terms, at times using phonetic spelling and a simplified form without diacritical marks, and at other times subscribing to the correct form, to familiarize readers with the arbitrariness of transliteration. Most of the time I have adopted the spelling of the authors consulted. Authors who refrain from using diacritical marks provide the reader with an approximate phonetic pronunciation, yet do not offer them an opportunity to explore how diacritical marks are applied. I hope that in interspersing the text with variations in spelling the reader who comes across text with diacritical marks will gradually come to understand how to pronounce the words after seeing an example of phonetic spelling elsewhere in the text.

Poor Padma. Things are always getting her goat. Perhaps even her name: understandably enough, since her mother told her, when she was only small, that she had been named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst village folk is 'The One Who Possesses Dung.'

* * *

I have been interrupted by Padma, who brought me dinner and then withheld it, black mailing me. . .She is particularly angry with my remarks about her name. 'What do you know, city boy?' she cried – hand slicing the air. 'In my village there is no shame in being named for the Dung Goddess. Write at once that you are wrong, completely.' In accordance with my lotus's wishes, I insert, forthwith, a brief paeon to dung.

Dung, that fertilizes and causes the crops to grow! Dung, which is patted into thin chapati-like cakes when still fresh and moist, and is sold to the village builders, who use it to secure and strengthen the walls of kachcha buildings made of mud! Dung, whose arrival from the nether end of cattle goes a long way towards explaining their divine and sacred status! Oh, yes, I was wrong, I admit I was prejudiced, no doubt because its unfortunate odours do have a way of offending my sensitive nose – how wonderful, how ineffably lovely it must be to be named for the Purveyor of Dung!

To the anonymous

Swiss cow

who initiated me into

the wonderful world of dung

by

drenching a mortified

nine year old dressed in her

Sunday white

satin shoes and frock

with

her smelly warm offering.

Introduction

In this thesis I explore the implications and wider resonance of a body of work produced in the 1990s by Indian artist Sheela Gowda who in 1998 won the newly instituted Sotheby's prize for contemporary art in India.¹ This stage of Gowda's evolution as an artist, triggered in part by the devastating violence of Hindu / Muslim riots, brought together fundamental aspects of her personality, her artistic training and her socio-political orientation. In search of a new artistic language which would render visible her concern over communal tension without being overtly polemical, but would also express the tension between "violence and sensuality" she felt was an inherent aspect of the events, Gowda abandoned oil paint and turned instead to cow-dung as an artistic medium.² Her use of this material excreted by the cow, an animal considered holy in India, leads me, as an art and cultural historian, to examine cow-dung's historical and sociological applications, which along with the idea of the cow, spans India's every day and ceremonial life. Cow-dung in itself bears multiple meanings, which have been drawn on for thousands of years in India. Today, when dung is manipulated into art and occasionally juxtaposed with other indigenous materials, its symbolism resonates on levels which trigger a wide range of responses related to India's socio-political-religious fabric, as well as to art world politics.

This research seeks to unravel from a group of artworks culturally embedded ideas I see, from the perspectives of an art historian and an Indian socio-cultural analyst, as embedded both consciously and less consciously in Gowda's work. Just as Gowda's art, with its profound simplicity and startling juxtaposition of materials acted as a portal which beckoned entry and challenged me to lay aside preconceived ideas about hierarchies of materials and creative practices, ancient and contemporary, Indian art

¹ I was drawn to this topic through my love for Indian art, through an interest in concepts and forms of the divine feminine, cross culturally, and through my desire to investigate the work of female artists, marginalized artists, as well as to challenge the canon. Last, but not least, I had an immediate visceral-emotional- intellectual- spiritual response to the art when Dr. Astri Wright first showed me some of Sheela Gowda's work in a seminar.

² She explains in an article written by Australian art critic and curator Victoria Lynn how this need to switch from oil to a different medium "became rather urgent after the riots," because oil felt too limiting. Gowda also reflects on how her earlier paintings were "dealing with violence and its relation to sensuality." Victoria Lynn, "Dung Heap. Sensuality and Violence in the Art of Sheela Gowda" (*Art Asia Pacific*, 3:4 1994), 80.

media and aesthetics, notions of beauty and profanity, this thesis too calls upon the reader to enter this world of sacred / tainted dung and delve into its very fabric of meanings which, as I will demonstrate, not only shift over time, but do so also within social and contextual circumstances.

Gowda's work is subtle in its complexity, ambiguous in its textured sub and übertones and rich in its connotative power. It follows that the reading I offer in this thesis will be a broad one which itself is a result of the coming together of different discourses: Gowda's art; limited commentary from the artist; India's visual art and materials in their broad cultural-historical context; my own socio-cultural background and my personal sensibilities and intellectual training.

I examine Gowda's art from various perspectives; it not only speaks to me as an interdisciplinary art historian, a detailed and wide analysis of her work is also essential because Gowda, exhibiting in an international arena, draws audiences from varied cultural backgrounds who approach her paintings and installations with different sets of values and socio-historical experiences. Once art is exhibited in public it is subject to viewer response and interpretation; each viewer brings to the artwork their emotional intellectual readings and these may be at odds either with the artist's intent, or with the deep socio-cultural premises and assumptions within and against which the author conceived and created the work.

Art historians view art with the objective of uncovering ideas embedded within the work; the artists own ideas and intent are of primary importance, but art historians also see general themes, symbols and materials inherent in a given work of art as issues of relevance, even beyond the artist's stated intent. Such issues can include aspects of the socio-political, religious, economic and cultural context in which the work of art was produced. In order to decipher what this visual text expresses about the world it was created in, I am not only investigating many of these factors, but also looking at a series of historical contexts and cultural practices that I see leading to and illuminating this body of work by Sheela Gowda: the evolution of the cow goddess as a divine figure through rural and higher Hindu ritual; the cow as a political icon in contemporary India; the religious discourses around cow and dung, the political inscribings of these in late twentieth century India; histories of folk art and women's art around the use of cow by-

products and how these practices, practitioners and products interface with urban gallery spaces. Both Sheela Gowda's dung art and these older, non-urban, non-canonized art practices produce exciting juxtapositions and meanings when brought together in the same text.

In this thesis, I argue that Gowda's art begs to be read as both overtly and covertly political, feminist and subversive:

- political, because she brings a nearly unthinkable material into the sanitized urban art world spaces, in India and abroad, and because in India the cow and her by-products today have been appropriated as political tools by the Hindu far right, who use the sacred cow as a bait in inciting increasing communal division between Hindus and Muslims;
- feminist, because Gowda is consciously fashioning herself as an Indian artist and an Indian woman artist through her choice of material by foregrounding marginalized discourses of arts usually associated with women, and by employing a medium used for centuries by both rural and lower class urban women as a viable and durable sculpting material;
- and subversive, for in turning away from the colonial import of oil and canvas associated with the academy and 'fine art,' Gowda is instead reinterpreting an indigenous folk art material and introducing it into the 'sacred' and 'elite' western imported gallery spaces of 'high art.'

In employing cow-dung which functions by default as a signifier for the cow, that ultimate symbol of Hinduism, Gowda is subtly critiquing not only the radical violence committed in the cow's name, and by extension the governing bodies themselves and the people implicated who allowed and perpetuated the hostility; she is also critiquing violent aspects of Hindu mythology. Gowda seems to be asking audiences, international and Indian, to take a look at their histories, at biases and oppression inherent within their religions, mythologies and politics, and to act. In moving the sacred cow away from the current political and religious fray into the secular spaces of the modernist art gallery, she is in a sense taking back one of the Hindutva militants' tools and is re-appropriating the cow for non-violent, peaceful means.

Gowda's work not only resonates with political meaning; in creating art with material from a wandering Hindu goddess whose excrement is invested with ideas of sanctity and purifactory resonance, I argue that Gowda is also making art that has religious connotations and undertones running throughout and within it. Because cow-dung is seen as representing the goddess Lakshmi and as having purifying qualities, someone with a spiritual leaning could conceive of Gowda's act as further sanctifying the gallery spaces already perceived by viewers as semi-sacred by nature - spaces wherein art selects viewers who discuss its meaning and its *raison d'être* in hushed tones. Her cow-dung paintings hung on the white walls of modernist architectural spaces in Mumbai or Bangalore may be seen as a way of reclaiming these spaces of modernity with their colonialist legacy; one could argue that she, in a post-modern spiritual ritual, is rendering the art gallery setting afresh, pure and neutral, ready to receive Indian art of all genealogies and forms without the overbearing values of a western imposed art history and its canon, which grew out of patriarchal and colonial European cultural preoccupations.

In this thesis I argue that Gowda's work may be read as feminist because she makes art with a material used by marginalized women as a cooking fuel; they either do not have access to other sources of fuel, or cannot afford electric or kerosene driven stoves. These women also draw on cow-dung for its sacred qualities to purify domestic spaces and to sculpt images of gods and goddesses. Many Indian women's ancestors have been sculpting and building with this readily available medium for centuries, and in bringing this material and its artistic legacy into the 'high art' spaces of contemporary art, Gowda is solidly embracing an indigenous, female-centered substance, as well as giving voice to, and affirming, these women's art-making. These are women who are marginalized economically, in power and decision-making in the public arena and often also at home, and who may be subject to inadequate protection or blatant non-enforcement of laws when in trouble, or abused in some way. Perhaps unintentionally, but through the association of her chosen material, Gowda is in some sense foregrounding their lives, inviting public awareness and potential discourse, all of which I perceive as in the realm of feminist acts.

In addition, Gowda appears to be calling upon viewers exposed to her art, at least those who think laterally about art and its media, to investigate this little known area of Indian art and to regard these women's ritually motivated art forms, often ephemeral in nature, as worthy of artistic nomenclature and merit. This idea clashes with ideals and values established by the western derived art historical canon, yet Gowda seems to be asking us to reshape our eyes and minds and formulate new criteria that are less solidly attached to an outmoded patriarchal European power base and thus to become more aware of the validity of other art forms, media, aesthetics and expressions.

Lastly, I read Gowda's work as delightfully subversive not only for the political, religious and feminist undertones mentioned above, but also because in using this, a material she can claim as both Indian and her own, she is turning away from the colonial import of oil and canvas, one associated with imperialism (today still evident in a barely-challenged and only slowly-eroding western driven definition of 'international') as well as with values and assumptions around what constitutes 'good art' and what is deemed 'derivative.' In creating art with cow-dung Gowda seems to be questioning not only colonialism but its legacy, a democracy based on patriarchal ideals of governance, which is increasingly moving toward the right, and is fraught with tension due in part to poverty, violence, corruption, regionalism and communal demands. To my mind, Gowda's art is also subversive because despite receiving part of her training in a western art institution associated with 'high art' and the 'canon' in London, she rejected their traditional materials, i.e. oil and canvas, to substitute them for a traditional material of her own, yet one considered filthy by many people and inappropriate for a high art setting.³

In using tools and focusing on subjects usually associated with a feminine domestic and ritual sphere distinctively Indian in its expression, and hence still valued less in a canonical discourse which treats Indian art as an adjunct to western art history, Gowda is challenging patriarchal assumptions. It is not the fact that women's cow-dung sculptures are 'ritual art' that has kept them out of art historical treatises (since Hindu

³ In 1999, New York's former Mayor Giuliani's sensibilities were shaken when the Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibited Chris Ofili's painting depicting a black Virgin Mary with elephant dung as part of the "Sensations" show. He was particularly offended that a city-subsidized building was showing this type of art which he claimed was "sick." He threatened to cut off all city funding for the Museum. Maurize Pinzon, "Museum of Modern Art To Honor Rudolph Giuliani,[sic]" May 10, 2003 <http://www.nynewsnetwork.com/Article.php?article=Museum+of+Modern+Art+To+Honor+Rudolph+Giuliani.xml> (March 4, 2004)

temples and sculpture are decidedly ritual in motivation and meaning), but the fact that they are made in ephemeral materials, are not monumental, have no ‘textual basis,’ at least in high texts, and are made by women. These male-centric, elitist and ‘classical’ biases are built into the discipline of art history – an academic field which grew out of a rarified inquiry by a privileged elite who had the time, resources and the education to discuss their acquisitions (their paintings and sculptures, many of them ‘trophy’ from other civilizations) in relation to their history and artistic legacy. The roots of this tradition of aesthetic evaluation were firmly planted in select perceptions of ancient Greece and edified through the Renaissance. Art history began as “a fundamental construction - by and for [European] men” whose evaluations created such narrow standards for high art and hence the canon, that large areas of creative work – entire classes and genders – were left out.⁴ Pollock describes the art history canon as both “a discursive structure and a structure of masculine narcissism within the exercise of cultural hegemony.”⁵ This was a canon wherein art of non-European origin, as well as women’s contributions and tools, materials and subject matter they favoured, initially had no place, and this is the paradigm which feminists and art historians who identify art histories relevant to the breadths and depths of other cultures try to deconstruct.⁶ At the same time, the problem lies not only with the ‘outsiders.’ Patriarchal assumptions are also built into the very structure of governance in India, not only due to ultra-fundamentalist Hindu values (which fly in the face of many of Hinduism’s oldest and most central ideas), but also because of the legacy of British colonial rule in India.

In addition to the above, I regard an integral part of Gowda’s artistic challenge to be a de-centering of the Hindu Nationalist “us versus them” perception that facilitates violence and is tied to women’s roles as chaste wife and mother – roles bound to class / caste assumptions that ignore many realities of women’s lives. I see Gowda’s art as unique, intelligent and creative expressions, both rooted in, and going beyond her hybrid cultural-artistic background, and I perceive her ideas as taking on forms which strain to rebel against all their cultural confines, and challenge the framers and frameworks of poverty, oppression, violence, the canon and communalism.

⁴ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 10.

⁵ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999) xiv.

⁶ All the values and ideas attached to art history have also affixed themselves to us, art history’s students.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In order to investigate Sheela Gowda's work which, on the one hand links her creative choices to Indian discourses of the cow and concepts of sanctity, and on the other to the cow's politicization in India today, this thesis covers a broad sweep of history, from Vedic times (ca 1500 BCE) to the contemporary period. To build my theoretical / methodological foundations, I have drawn on a combination of Indian art history and related interdisciplinary scholars; feminist critiques, post-modern criticism and new historicism. I have consulted material by art historians Whitney Chadwick, Vidya Dehejia, Geeta Kapur and Griselda Pollack, all of whom are intent on laying bare the constructed nature of art history and exposing how the canon with its roots, values and power structure firmly entangled in a patriarchal European / Christian tradition, and blinded by its fascination with itself, neither considered art by women, nor of non-Europeans, worthy of discourse.

In addition, I also draw on work produced by philologists, Sanskrit scholars, religious studies professors and folklorists concerned with India's sacred texts, as well treatises produced by scholars on India's art forms. I refer to philologists such as Heinrich Zimmer, who was innovative in not only consulting Vedic texts and post Vedic sources such as the Puranas, but also in studying how these texts were disseminated in orally told folktales, myths and art. Zimmer turned to visual sources and Hindu iconography to expand on his discourses thereby offering a rich textual interpretation of Indian art, influencing scholars such as Joseph Campbell and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. Doniger's love of language leads her to examine meaning in Sanskrit texts, but she also works with folktales and myths providing vivid descriptions of her subject matter, which range from fluids, such as milk in the Vedas, to goddesses and the idea of the androgyne. Pupul Jakakar's *Earth Mother* also focuses on an adjunct history of art. She discusses art visualized through legends and firmly rooted in rural traditions. Further sources of vivid visual imagery transmitted in folk text form and analyzed by Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi and Anne Feldhaus, are invaluable in indicating how the myth and magic of the cow and her by-products not only permeates the popular imagination, but also manifests in a sacred landscape.

Art historians working in the field of Indian art see not only Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943) as a forerunner, but Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Stella Kramrisch (1898 – 1993) as well.⁷ Vidya Dehejia, George Michell and others continue to expand the canon in ways one could see as following the urge to ‘Indianize’ Indian art history.⁸ Many art history books on India, such as Susan Huntington’s *The Art of Ancient India* (1985) focus on monumental stone sculptures and architecture hewn either from living rock or assembled to create impressive temples covered with lively relief work, but Michell has also looked at temple architecture constructed in wood in his treatise on southern temples and living traditions in wood. Art historian Stella Kramrisch, who explored sacred art in India between the 1920s and 1950s, diversified the traditional academic approach to investigate rural women’s art making and ritual, a tradition that subsequent art historians such as Jyotindra Jain and Stephen Huyler have built and expanded upon. Jain challenges western art historical constructs by insisting that folk artists can be ‘masters’ in their own right. Huyler focuses on recording women’s ritual art, a category which is still considered cultural anthropology, but here the boundaries between art history, sociology and anthropology are collapsing, categories that I too am intent on challenging.

Only one of the most recent text books on Indian art, notably by Partha Mitter (2001)⁹ also includes a very brief section on folk art / craft, “the Non-Canonical Arts of Tribal Peoples, Women and Artisans,” albeit focusing on more permanent manifestations of art in the form of textiles, jewellery or women’s painting rather than on ephemeral or ritual arts. In describing them as non-canonical, he too is succumbing to and refers to the

⁷ Roger Lipsey, Ed. *Coomaraswamy* in 3 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c 1977). This is a collection of his writings, with a complete list of publications and commentary. Stella Kramrisch’s big first work was *The Hindu Temple*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946) reprint (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996). Another early publication, one which broke away from the canon, was Stella Kramrisch’s *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968). *Exploring India’s Sacred Art: selected writings of Stella Kramrisch* / edited and with a biographical essay by Barbara Stoler Miller (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 1983) is deemed a classic. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* edited by Joseph Campbell, (Princeton UP, 1992). Heinrich Zimmer, *Artistic Form and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India (Kunstform und Yoga in indischen Kultbild)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984).

⁸ George Michell, *Living Wood. Sculptural Traditions of Southern India* (London: Marg Publications, 1992), and *Hindu Art and Architecture* (London ; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

Vidya Dehejia, *Devi. The Great Goddess* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1999) and *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).

⁹ Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford UP), 2001.

western art historical canon. Not only the cow featured as an art icon, but also art created using ephemeral and natural, low-cost materials, including cow-dung, is by and large missing in art historical treatises and this is where I intend for this thesis to fill part of the gap. I will be augmenting both Kramrisch's and Huyler's investigations of folk art and ritual by bringing them, through Sheela Gowda, into the realm of contemporary / international art history. My thesis will focus on the traditional use of the material and how it is transformed in contemporary art to address a wide range of issues previously outlined in my argument.

The crux of my thesis is about the validity of art made in all places, eras and by any people whatever their status and gender, and about the importance of art in a global image producing institution increasingly dominated by what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreal and . . . simulation."¹⁰ Art is a cultural artifact, the visual evidence of a coming together of mind, body, emotion, spirit and matter; it is the final product manifested after interacting and grappling with various philosophical preoccupations during pre-digestion. Art arrests and authenticates a physical moment in time; it acts as contextual evidence and almost as a window into that time and place, albeit not one with transparent glass, but clouded, enhanced or shaped both by the vision of the creator and by the viewer's eyes peering within and through its surface. Abstract art in particular invites contemplation and exploration.¹¹ It allows the viewer space to enter, roam and discover meaning. Sometimes profound insights into life, mind, and self/ otherselves¹² may be gained by discerning simple connections and patterns of repetition within a brushstroke, through the layering of paint, or through oscillating juxtapositions, recognitions which expand beyond intellectual understanding and resonate on a deeper, corporeal, or soul sensing level.¹³ This thesis explores how in Gowda's art the memories lie deep and reach beyond time and space, gender, class and caste, for the material itself is multi-layered, deeply invested with profound theological insights, folkloric memories,

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard quoted by John Storey in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 181-2.

¹¹ As a student trained in the visual arts and encouraged to read symbols in the broadest sense, I see the abstract qualities of Gowda's art as an inviting point of entry which beckons me to explore the symbolism and meaning within the material itself and within the application thereof. .

¹² A term borrowed from Dr. Astri Wright

¹³ Using the term soul-sensing is a way for me to express a vision, feeling or understanding which reaches beyond shallow intellectual comprehension, and even extends past corporeal gut response.

ritual and folk art practices.

In India, cow-dung resonates with ideas of purity, abundance and divinity: it is associated with the goddesses and is also used in Vedic ritual. Cow-dung speaks of poverty because it is often utilized by the most marginalized of women as a fuel, and cow-dung holds the seeds of violence, seen in riots which sometimes break out over mere rumours that a cow has been slaughtered: thus cow-dung oscillates with tension, connoting fear and abhorrent violence. This quilt of symbolic resonance is neatly packaged through Gowda's cow-dung paintings and brought to "an art gallery near you," i.e. within the international spaces of global contemporary art.¹⁴ Here the viewer may see some of the patterns of tiered meanings, the converging and contrary streams inherent within the artwork, or they may just perceive a muddy brown surface, and, unimpressed, move on. But as a window shaped around time, memory and place, the physical / material evidence created as art is an important solidification of that moment and one that cannot be replaced by the simulacrum. The material evidence of that moment matters. It acts as a visceral text. Although I can only demonstrate the validity of that art filtered through my biased eyes, this thesis shares my understandings of some of the layered meanings running throughout a select body of artwork by a contemporary female Indian artist.

The goal of this thesis is not to offer a definitive study on Sheela Gowda or her oeuvre of art; my intention is to peel aside and expose the many veins of meaning I perceive running through and within her work, to foster dialogue, cross-cultural exchange and an awareness of India's diverse historical, cultural and political background, and to follow in the footsteps of a number of art historians who may not be indigenous to the cultures they are researching, yet have felt compelled to cross borders both within and through their discipline to foster a "cross-cultural process."¹⁵

¹⁴ In case this is lost on the reader, here I am parodying a TV ad which is ridiculous, since this is one substance / art form that would be difficult to mass produce, package and commercialize.

¹⁵ A term coined by Lucy Lippard and quoted by Melanie Anne Herzog in her essay on Afro American artist Elizabeth Catlett. Melanie Anne Herzog "Elizabeth Catlett," *Singular Women – Writing the Artist*, eds. Kristen Frederikson & Sarah E. Webb (Berkeley and London: University of California press, 2003), 168. Some examples of art historians writing about women artists from Asia are Vidya Dehejia, *Representing the Body* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997); Deepali Dewan, "Shelley Bahl, Zarina Bhimji, Vivan Sundaram," *ArtAsiaPacific*, Issue 37, (2003); Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Women as Artists in Contemporary India." *From Independence Towards Freedom*, Baharati Ray and Aparna Basu. ed. (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999); Stephen Huyler, "Creating Sacred Spaces. Women's Wall and Floor Decoration in Indian Homes," *Mud, Mirror and Thread* (Nora Fisher ed. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, Pvt. Ltd.,

Like a number of authors writing about / with and learning from women from other nations, societies, classes or cultures, I cannot bring to this work “knowledge from within;” rather, I am writing from the point of view of an outsider looking in, a position I have reason to question.¹⁶ Not being of Hindu descent, nor having experienced life in India as Gowda has, how can I approach this topic with integrity? As one lacking this internal cultural knowledge, what right do I have to examine this artist and her art? Clearly, writing from an outsider’s position has many disadvantages. However, reflection and experience has shown me that the outsider’s position has the benefit of coming from a place of questioning, wondering and curiosity and of not taking knowledge and insight, let alone answers, for granted. In addition, being an outsider has the added advantage of not being weighted down with cultural baggage peculiar to the country of interest and, in the case of India, of not being slotted into the now officially dismantled, but still very apparent caste-system which is often engrossed with its own prejudices, discriminations, and preconceptions about Other. Furthermore, I was drawn early on in life to India’s systems of knowledge which provided answers and insights to philosophical ruminations that my Catholic upbringing could never satisfy. Finally, I believe art and music, in their numerous shapes, nuances, rhythms and forms, are languages we inherently respond to and which swiftly make inroads into levels of our being and run deep enough that these non-verbal arts quickly transgress cultural boundaries.

I was originally introduced to Sheela Gowda’s art through Dr. Astri Wright. She encountered the artist and her work in New York and presented me with a catalogue produced in 1996 for the New York exhibition entitled: *Traditions / Tensions*:

1995), *Painted Prayers* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), *Village India* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985; Jyotindra Jain. ed. *Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India* (New Delhi: Crafts Museum, 1998); Geeta Kapur, “Framing / Unframing,” *The Art News Magazine of India* (Vol. IV, Issue IV, 1999) and “Body as Gesture: Indian Women Artists at Work,” *Representing the Body*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997); Victoria Lynn, “Dung Heap. Sensuality and Violence in the Art of Sheela Gowda,” *Art Asia Pacific*. (3:4 1996); Trina Lyons, “Women Artists of the Nathadwara School,” *Representing the Body*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997); Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, “Five Artists from India,” *Woman’s Art Journal* (2002 / 2003); Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford, Oxford: UP, 2001); Isana Murti, *Anjolie Ela Menon* (New Delhi : Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1995); Gayatari Sinha ed. *Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1997); Astri Wright, “Lucia Hartini, Javanese Painter: Against the Grain, Towards Herself,” *Studies in Southeast Asian Art*, ed. Nora Taylor, (Cornell: Southeast Asian Publications, 2000) and “Self Taught All The Way: Three Contemporary Women Artists in Indonesia,” *Women Imagining Women* (Manila: Ford Foundation, 1999) and *Soul, Spirit and Mountain*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1994).

¹⁶ Herzog, “Elizabeth Catlett,” *Singular Women – Writing the Artist*, 169.

Contemporary Art in Asia. While I was working on this thesis, she also provided me with its title and with the delightful and deliciously provocative idea of how the cow's excrement may be transformed "from dung to divinity." My first physical encounter with Gowda's work took place in February 2002, when I visited "Moving Ideas: A Contemporary Cultural Dialogue with India," a multi-venued event organized by Hoopoe curatorial in Vancouver, B.C.¹⁷ Gowda is a relatively young artist and as yet, not too much has been written about her or her work. This fact, among other things, inspired me to research her work and ideas.

When I first approached this research, I intended the thesis to be a collaborative effort; I wished for the living artist, Sheela Gowda, to lend input, so that her thoughts, and her challenges to my suggestions would be part of this text; I wanted to privilege her voice, and have her voice speak through my writing for this is an important part of my commitment to dialogue, an approach that also finds grounding in feminist methodology.¹⁸ It lends the subject agency and redistributes the authority that inevitably comes to reside in printed text. I did not want to act as yet another a colonizer, especially in light of India's history, exploiting Gowda and her work for the benefit of my own interests. However, Gowda is both wary of verbalizing too much about her art and very pressed for time. She is deeply involved with her art, which entails travelling to Europe and the USA for various exhibitions, as well with the process of being a mother. Gowda's direct voice is mostly missing from this text because she explicitly stated she did not wish to be quoted on anything discussed between us, due to the danger of a quotation being taken out of context and having its meaning misconstrued. I have therefore paraphrased our discussions, but wherever possible I inserted the artist's voice where it was gleaned from public sources, be this a newspaper article written by Gowda herself in homage to her art teacher, a second hand quotation which made its way into someone else's writing on the artist, or an on-line interview, as a way to make up for her verbal absence in my text.

¹⁷ See appendix for a review of exhibitions.

¹⁸ This is the feminist methodology I aspired to use. I envisioned sending the thesis back and forth, having Gowda comment and rework passages, correct misconceptions etc. I wanted this thesis to not only ring true for me, but for Sheela Gowda.

Working with a living artist, I felt I walked a fine line. I always yearned for Gowda to give me more; I wished for her enthusiasm in this project; instead I met with skepticism. Consciously aware of my position as an art historian informed by certain specific values and standards and, in addition being an outsider of Anglo-Euro descent, I was reluctant to pursue my desire for feedback more aggressively; I deliberately held back, not wanting to be an invasive presence in Gowda's life and not wishing to insult or alienate her.¹⁹

Shaped through the nature of my encounter with Sheela Gowda and with her art which, due its rich connotative power, in itself offers fertile ground for analysis, this thesis deliberately refrains from being too biographical. Instead the inquiry focuses on a particular body of work created by a secular Hindu artist within its historical, socio-political and religious context, as interpreted through the lenses I have described above. The artist's response also prompted new insight into processes of incorporating women into established, male-centric histories.²⁰ After Linda Nochlin's seminal essay "Why have there been no great women artists?"²¹ feminist scholars have justifiably intervened in the male-dominated art canonical history and excavated women artist's lost lives and works of art. But, as Frederikson points out, to retroactively be deemed a famous female artist often "requires a compelling life story."²² Subsequently, too many women artists' lives have been sensationalized, at the expense of serious analysis and interpretation of their work from Indian artist Amrita Sher Gill's tragically short life and the intrigue surrounding her because her mother destroyed most of her correspondence,²³ to Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi's horrific trials following rape; from the French sculptress Camille Claudel's involvement with one of the most famous sculptors of the twentieth

¹⁹ This differs so vastly from Astri Wright's experience of working with several Indonesian women artists very closely over the years and it consequently led to my methodology partially differing from hers, which has informed how this thesis is shaped.

²⁰ Yet her art is here irrevocably and additionally contextualized in being seen through and interpreted by me, a recent Anglo / Scottish-Swiss immigrant to Canada via Australia.

²¹ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (*ArtNews*, Jan, 1971), 22-39.

²² Kristen Frederikson, "Introduction," *Singular Women – Writing the Artist*, eds. Kristen Frederikson & Sarah E. Webb (Berkeley and London: University of California press, 2003), 3.

²³ Indian feminist art historian Geeta Kapur situates Amrita Sher Gill who "appeared on the Indian art scene in the mid-1930s" at the "beginnings of Indian modernism" and she notes we must therefore "on her account reckon with an inadvertent 'feminization' of modern Indian art. . . [She] made an irreversible social space for the woman artist within Indian art. . . [and] most women artists in India have Amrita Sher Gill as a strong reference." Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism. Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 4-5.

century, to Frida Kahlo's incredible journey of zeal and physical and emotional suffering, and Ana Mendieta's passionate search for her own, long denied subjectivity, cut short by her sudden death.

In conducting research with a living artist, my intention was to tread lightly and to neither become an invasive force in Gowda's life, nor fall into the trap of sensationalizing or 'exoticizing' her life, which could result in her personal circumstances acting as overbearing signifiers of magnification on her work. Out of respect for the artist's privacy I refrained from asking personal questions and I also do not share here aspects of her personal life I was exposed to. In avoiding biography, I realize how this approach too is problematic and will send off alarm bells within feminist and postcolonial circles, especially in light of India's colonial history, and the implications of erasing subjectivity. Broude and Garrard comment on how just as women artists were starting to be scripted into the canon, post-structuralism called for abandoning the idea of the author / artist which they identified in itself as being a culturally specific creation "a set of meanings generated around that name. . . [and] determined by interpretive strategies."²⁴ These "death of the author theories," Broude and Garrard note, "emerged . . . just at the time when feminist scholars were attempting to gain a place for women artists within the historical canon."²⁵ It seems to me that a middle way between these two extremes is desirable here. I believe, I offer in this thesis enough biographical information not to render Gowda a generic but sensationalized contemporary Indian artist, but one endowed with a 'unique-to-herself' creativity and visual / conceptual intelligence and, above all, with agency.

My methodology is also informed by an aspect I have touched on before, and that is my position as a researcher approaching India from the outside. I have alluded to the dangers of once again creating a colonial relationship. It has occurred to me that this is a relationship which also seems to be a peculiarity of working as an art historian, and one that may be difficult to avoid. Even with a degree of access to the artist, there is inevitably the art historian's response, who, in attempting to 'translate' across temporal and / or cultural barriers, is inevitably presenting also his or her own reconstructions shaped by his / her

²⁴ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Expanding Discourse* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1992), 4.

²⁵ Broude and Garrard, *The Expanding Discourse*, 4.

biases and opinions. Art historians often project their fantasies and their desires onto subjects and their art and mold them to suit their agenda, with voices of disciplinary authority imputing meanings, intents and roles to works of art. Original meanings are distorted along a continuum that runs from 'subtle' to 'extreme,' and if the artist is dead, they have no means of refuting theories imposed upon them or their art.

Gowda is very aware that art, once placed in the public arena, is filtered through subjectivities and open to various interpretations. She asked me, in the course of this research, to stress that the interpretation of her artwork is mine and does not necessarily reflect her views. She places much importance on both privacy and subtlety; she has told me that she finds my views rather passionately definitive.²⁶ It appears that she is not entirely comfortable with the process of an artist being scrutinized by an art historian-in-training. This potentially exploitative vein of art historical scholarship is made even more painfully explicit for me, because I have chosen to write on art produced by an artist from a post-colonial nation, one which was oppressed by the British, whose language is the primary one I inherited, and which I currently use to discuss aspects of India's history and Sheela Gowda's art.

All of this has led me to the decision that I must render my position as transparent as possible and make the art historian's place within the discourse around art evident in order to make visible the constructions of our discipline and to defer authority from my voice in the text. Yet, in defense of our discipline, without art historians art would not receive the attention it deserves. In this light, instead of regarding the relationship between artist and art historian as potentially exploitive, or parasitical, it may be viewed as symbiotic, or complementary, and as one that, when practiced with care, may be of mutual benefit to all parties involved, whatever doubts any of them may have at the outset. Lastly, with this thesis, I wish to demonstrate that art history is a discipline not only intensely self conscious of itself and the perimeters of its creation, but one that like many others, is in flux and is willing to shift its position.²⁷

²⁶ Sheela Gowda, email correspondence, January 22 2004

²⁷ Of course this shift can only happen with the blessings of governing bodies willing to spend monies in research areas regarded by the majority as minor or marginal, or with the sanction of influential commercial bodies such as Sotheby's and Christie's who in the 1990s set up shop in the east.

This thesis is primarily informed by a response to the art itself and secondarily through a post-modern framework drawing on feminism, post-colonialism and New Historicism. New Historicism emerged in literary studies in the late 1980s and was inspired by Michel Foucault's ideas of history as archeology. It was his intention to uncover marginal histories through digging below the surface into the substrata of language or data, as well as through looking at the margins of history in order to uncover those stories not usually revealed through the main body of work, be this the historical or the art historical meta-narrative. Postmodern discourse in the form of post-structuralism and post-colonialism has also rejected modernist meta-narratives in favour of investigating those spaces left behind.

I will not only discuss work produced by Sheela Gowda, a successful artist who exhibits her art internationally, I will also draw on her art as a jumping off point to provide an examination of those spaces omitted in India's primary art historical narrative, by investigating the marginal and ephemeral arts by indigenous women who apply cow-dung to create ritual art forms, folk art expressions, architectural sculptural forms and protective devices. This is a deliberate attempt at blurring the boundaries between public and private creativity, between rural and urban spaces, and within the hierarchies ascribed to materials and art forms by the canon.

To me, Gowda's art also encourages an exploration of the cow's meanings and formal transformations within Indian folklore and ritual. This will foster a better understanding of the cow's central place in Hinduism over time as well as provide outsider readers / audiences with contextually informed views on how the cow may incite inflamed passion in India's explosive political environment of today.²⁸ This thesis calls for the reader to reconsider the validity of art forms deemed by art historical standards we have inherited to be ephemeral, marginal or minor, to challenge the canon, and to question its geographical and gendered power base.

²⁸ Inspired by the subversive quality of Gowda's work, and its potential objective of re-positioning the cow in the high arts canon through her by-products, I also investigated popular depictions of the cow in temple arts and folk arts, as well as bovine-related ephemeral folk and sacred art forms. As far as one can tell from available publications, the cow, although considered sacred, is not represented as an entity in her own right in the high arts canon. She occurs frequently in images depicting Krishna, but she has neither temples dedicated to her, nor monumental sculptures hewn in her name. However, she is represented in the folk and popular arts crafted by artisans. It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss these images, but I intend to address this subject more in-depth through future research.

To this effect this art / cultural historical study is an attempt at redressing the canon, at remedying the vast discrepancy of literature, in academic libraries world wide, concerned with artists of European or “American” descent. It is also an attempt at narrowing the gap between the disproportionate representations of male versus female artists. I am not interested in adding to the western-centric art historical paradigm by writing one more exposé on the glories, wonders and genius of yet another Michelangelo; I want to introduce the reader to aspects of an art history that many of us, brought up with Christian-Euro-American values and backgrounds, are unfamiliar with. I was drawn to this methodology inspired by my first art history professor, feminist Clare Edington, who introduced me to the many female artists lurking below the surface of western art history and then, more recently, through Dr. Astri Wright, who exposed me to modern, contemporary and indigenous art of South and Southeast Asia through her writing, teaching and academic guidance, in particular her research on contemporary Indonesian women artists. This thesis endeavours to add to the growing body of work written by feminists and other boundary-bending art historians in this discipline’s various shapes and forms.²⁹ It aims to contribute to undermining conventional art historical practices in order to challenge a canon, which is elitist in form, and due to its birth (as a child born to a certain era through a hierarchically privileged and exclusive power base) incorporated sexism and racism into its foundations.

Indian art and sculpture was immediately dismissed by early medieval travellers and later colonizers who were trained in the western way of looking as “grotesque” and “irrational;” statues of deities were perceived as monstrous and resembling the devil.³⁰ Today, in spite of what some western art historians would like to believe, male and western artists as well as scholars, still dominate the canon.

Canonicity [notes Griselda Pollock] exists in many forms, the better to produce, at the cultural and ideological level, the single standard of the greatest and the best for all time. ‘Tradition’ is the canon’s ‘natural’ face and in this form cultural regulation participates in . . . social and political hegemony. In distinction to gross forms of coercive social or political domination, the Marxist term *hegemony* explains the way a particular social and political order culturally saturates a society

²⁹ Astri Wright’s, *Soul, Spirit and Mountain* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1994) was the first study of contemporary art in Asia, which included women artists as a large part of it. Her research was historiographically pioneering and path-breaking (see footnote 10).

³⁰ Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: UP 1977).

so profoundly that its regime is lived by its population simply as 'common sense.'
Hierarchy becomes a natural order. . .³¹

It is my intention not only to challenge 'common sense' ideas but also "to redistribute the authority of geographical and gender based power."³² Even though I am not suffering under the delusion that this modest piece of work will subvert the paradigm, it is a small step in remedying the huge gap which exists between male and female artists, between white artists and artists of colour, between the minor and the high arts as well as between spiritual (= irrational) and secular (= rational) arts.

The European and European derived high art canon is arbitrary; its roots lie in sixteenth century Italy and, we are taught, Vasari, writing about male Renaissance artists, is our forefather.³³ This thesis attempts to challenge the status quo and question the dominant and patriarchal historical underpinnings of our discipline so that the reader may reconsider our aesthetic choices, the discipline, the options, whiteism, sexism, euro-centrism, chance, dominance, materials and value systems and reflect on other aesthetic choices and possibilities which are just as valid.

A canon such as the one established in the west did not exist in India. Mitter points out that

unlike the narrow western interpretation of fine art, the distinction between fine and decorative arts was not pronounced in India. . . [thus] [a]ny discussion of Indian art must encompass a wide range of different media: architecture, sculpture, illustrated manuscripts, painting, miniatures, textiles, and latterly photography and installation work.³⁴

Craven in his preface to *Indian Art* cautions vigilance

regarding the terms 'art' and 'artist' in relation to Indian culture. . . [because] most . . . objects [considered art]. . . are devotional in nature . . . fashioned by craftsmen who worked in a tradition which dictated strict canons of iconography and manufacture, and who could never have understood the meaning of the word 'artist' as it is used today.³⁵

Dehejia states how much of India's art was created in a collaborative mode in guilds; thus most of it is anonymous, although there are exceptions. She indicates that this "anonymity may rest in artists' low status in the hierarchical caste system of India."³⁶

³¹ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 10.

³² Connie Morey, email correspondence, December, 3, 2003.

³³ Vasari, incidentally, wrote "histories" on his contemporaries.

³⁴ Mitter, *Indian Art*, 1.

³⁵ Roy, C. Craven, *Indian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, rev. 1997), 8.

³⁶ Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 15.

Indian artists inherited their profession and they belonged to the lowest caste, the *sudras*, labourers, who were also crafters producing pots, cloth and metal-ware.³⁷ Although there was not a canon in place per se, there was a theory of aesthetics, and a method for, and practice of, criticism and connoisseurship: good art was defined by *rasa*, a criterion especially applied to dance performances, but later transferred to painting and sculpture. *Rasa* is a quality compared to the juice, essence, flavour, or extract of the finest part. Art either had *ni-rasa*, no such inherent quality, or abounded in *rasavat* (imbued with *rasa*).³⁸ There were nine types of *rasa* and it was a theory which involved an active viewer, i.e. viewer response. The viewer needed to be capable of perceiving or drawing out *rasa* and a responsive viewer was called *rasika*.

Clearly, applying a European derived conception of art onto cultures other than Europe (or Euro-colonized, whether the ‘New World’ or the ‘Orient’ etc) is problematic, but with artists having received western-styled academic training both within their countries and abroad, and with art galleries, art houses and art auction houses operating in India and select South-east Asian cities, a fusion of sorts has taken place and the western art history canon, an antiquated, barnacle-encrusted vessel which has been tossed around in waters for too long, is poised on cracking and breaking open; when subjected to enough pressure it will burst and make way for a new vessel, in the form of a paradigm shift, which will accommodate other visions and sensibilities.

Literature review and Overview of Chapters

To my knowledge, to date there has been no detailed study conducted either on Sheela Gowda, who is a relatively young artist, or to cow-dung and its use in an artistic context. Because the meaning of Gowda’s art resides in understanding how the cow is conceived of both as a sacred and as a political being, this thesis draws on material spanning Vedic times (ca 1500 BCE) to the contemporary period. It is interdisciplinary for I needed to traverse a number of disciplines ranging from religious studies to political science, and I consulted a variety of sources employing various methodologies, from

³⁷ Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 13, 15. Brahmins enjoyed the exalted status of priest and scholar – they were followed by the kshatriyas, the rulers, the vaishyas, traders, and finally the sudras.

³⁸ Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 20.

sacred Vedic texts and folk legends, history books on India, art history books, feminist texts, anthropological studies, religious treatises, to novels on and about anything Indian, museum publications, field notes, show reviews, the art itself, personal interviews, email correspondence with the artist, on-line newspaper clippings and exhibition catalogues.

Chapter one offers a brief overview of Sheela Gowda's career through her art school training and through exhibitions. Because the focus of this thesis is on the body of work produced in the 1990s using cow-dung, this chapter only provides a short discussion of Gowda's early oil paintings in relation to her later work. In it I present limited biographical data on the artist with the intention of providing an understanding of her positioning in India and the extent to which she may have been exposed to aspects of cultural practices and beliefs involving rural women and their art making. This chapter draws on field notes, exhibition data provided by the artist, and an article written by Gowda for the *Deccan Herald* (Bangalore's premier newspaper) which describes the environment of her first art school and the influence her teacher had on her art making. I also consult a description of Gowda's oil paintings by Bangalore art critic Marta Jakimowicz-Karle, who situates Gowda as an artist painting from a feminist perspective, who is not adverse to probing into disturbing and unsettling situations which contain an underlying motif of violence.

Employing Gowda's cow-dung paintings as jumping off points with which to leap back in time, chapter two discusses early uses of cow by-products and cow imagery in India in order to contextualize Gowda's use of the material and inform the reader on how it potentially resonates with ideas of sanctity. It investigates the importance of the cow, cow-dung and other cow by-products used in Hindu ritual. It looks at Vedic cow goddesses, as well as the goddess Lakshmi and the wish fulfilling cow Kamadhenu, and at cows as mythological animals deeply embedded within India's sacred landscape and religious culture, in order to situate the cow in terms of her sacred and political importance in India today. Finally, it focuses on the importance of Krishna as a pastoral deity who today is a central figure in Hindu lore, devotion, ritual and art and around which much cow iconography is employed and cow-dung art is created. The second chapter points to the cow's central position in Hindu India today. She and her by-products are woven into the very fabric of the land; she is considered a wandering

goddess who blesses the very earth she steps on. She is knitted physically and psychically into Hindu consciousness.

This chapter is informed by Hindu sacred literature translated and interpreted by religious studies professors and folklorists, in order to determine how and if the cow played a central, or merely a peripheral role in Vedic and post Vedic times. David R. Kinsley reflects on how the goddesses are mentioned only infrequently in Vedic texts but when they are discussed it is often in association with the cow who plays an important role as facilitating creation. The goddesses seem to evolve into more important deities over time and Wendy Doniger, Tracy Pintchman and David Kinsley who discuss her presence in Vedic texts, point out how she gains increased importance in post Vedic India and is mentioned frequently in the Puranas. Upendra Nath Dhal discusses cow-dung in association both with the Vedic idea of Sri and with the Puranic goddess Lakshmi. Chapter two also consults Gonda's *Vedic Ritual* to ascertain how customs involving cow-dung developed over time. D.N Jha's *The Myth of the Holy Cow* offers a highly critical reading of Hindu practice and ritual and Abbé Dubois' *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, a book written in the early nineteenth century assumes an anthropological approach as it peers into domestic spaces to ascertain the role and importance of ritual. In this chapter I also draw on excerpts from an interview conducted with a Brahmin scholar Lakshmi Krishnamurthy who affirms the cow's importance in Brahmanic ritual today.

Folk tales and legends compiled by Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi in her book *The Self-milking Cow and the Bleeding Lingam*, 1987, and by Anne Feldhaus in her investigation on *Water and Womanhood*, 1995, were exceedingly helpful in pointing towards the popular conceptions of roles played by the cow and / or her by-products in India today, and in indicating how the myth and magic surrounding the cow not only permeates the popular imagination, but also manifests as a sacred landscape divinely ordained. This chapter also consults Deryck Lodrick's marvelous study on *Goshalas*, (cow shelters) an invaluable source in exposing the value attached to the cow and the importance of cow-by products in temple ritual. It draws on research by Charlotte Vaudeville who explores Krishna as a pastoral deity and discusses how women celebrate Krishna in ritual using cow-dung. Visual evidence provided by photographer Robyn Beeche augments Vaudeville's text, but also throws a new light on her interpretations.

Chapter three focuses on the cow's vital importance in women's daily lives and on cow-dung's central role in women's ritual and indigenous art forms to demonstrate why it was appropriate for Sheela Gowda as a Hindu woman to pick up the material and reinterpret its traditional use. It explores how dung can fluctuate from being a waste product to a useful substance in demand as a fuel, an adhesive applied in an architectural setting, a medium exploited for artistic purposes and one coveted as a pure and purifying substance imbued with transformative powers. This chapter forges a direct link to Sheela Gowda who in adopting cow-dung as a medium identifies with millions of women who use it in its various aspects and forms on a daily basis. Chapter three draws heavily on research conducted by anthropologist and art historian Stephen Huyler who has contributed enormously to recording the ephemeral arts through photography and thus making them visible in the world. This chapter also draws on images provided by Robyn Beeche. Although anthropologists are most often outside researchers peering in on a culture foreign to their own, an aspect of their work which is itself fraught with issues, Huyler has been travelling to India for decades to record women's ritual and art forms, and photographer Robyn Beeche today lives in India. In this chapter I also rely on primary sources related either through autobiographical accounts, or by women and priests I met in India, and on material compiled by contemporary art historian and curator Dr. Jyotindra Jain. Both Kramrisch and Jain have not only vastly added to our knowledge of ritual, folk arts and crafts, Jain in particular has also been instrumental at chipping away at the western imposed canon which renders craft minor, and at subverting it by clearly demonstrating how some folk artists have the right to be called masters.

The fourth chapter touches on the socio-political relevance of Gowda's work as it analyzes her art and how it relates to feminism and ideas covered in chapters two and three on women's labour, rituals, Hindu mythology, and sanctity. In this chapter the art itself functions as the main text, a primary source supplemented with my memoirs and notes based on meeting and speaking with the artist and also on my correspondence. In discussing the paintings and installations, I draw both from actual encounters with the work in exhibitions and at Gowda's studio, as well as on reproduced images. During my visit Gowda kindly provided me with such secondary sources as gallery pamphlets, exhibition catalogues, journal articles, show reviews and photocopies of newspaper

articles written about exhibitions in which her paintings and installations were featured. This chapter also draws on journal articles which either include interviews with the artist or comment on her work. Contributions by Geeta Kapur to India's contemporary art world, as an Indian art critic, author and curator, stand out. Her book, *When was Modernism*, which focuses on creative practice rather than evaluating the end products, further circumventing the canon by discussing film as well, also includes Sheela Gowda. In 1995, Kapur curated the first 'Africus Biennale' in Johannesburg, South Africa, in which Gowda participated. This chapter also consults tertiary sources, on-line documentation, notably from the WebPages of the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis where Gowda exhibited between February and May of 2003. The artist, who sent me digital images on a compact disc kindly provided visual material for this chapter.

The fifth chapter looks at the impetus behind Sheela Gowda's desire to create art using cow-dung as a response to the violence of the Hindu / Muslim riots and at how the cow, amidst fervent nationalisms, has become politicized. This chapter delves into some of India's recent history, from the 1880s onwards into the present time and discusses the rise in nationalism, Gandhi, cow protection, Ayodhya and its aftermath. It discusses the sale of cow by-products as health enhancers promoted by the BJP, the current party in power, and how the cow has increasingly been used as a political instrument and has played a central role in inflaming passions on both sides. It consults numerous sources written by historians, political scientists, and journalists both by Hindu, Muslim and non-Indian commentators and concludes with musings on how to find an appropriate visual language to adequately express some of the concern many artists and citizens are feeling in India's political climate today.

Chapter One

Sheela Gowda: an Overview

This chapter presents a brief biography on Sheela Gowda in order to offer the reader an understanding of her artistic development, her placement in the contemporary Indian and international art world, as well as her exposure to women's cultural practices within a rural context. It includes a brief summary of the artist's education, an abbreviated biography based on exhibition data, as well as a letter Gowda wrote in homage to her art teacher, which describes the *arte povera* inspired environment she was exposed to during her training at Ken school in Bangalore and which indubitably influenced her artistic choices later on in her career. It also presents a short discussion on Gowda's early oil paintings which explore some of the issues she was dealing with that spill over and shape her subsequent works of art.

Born in 1957 in Bhadravati, Sheela Gowda grew up in this mid-sized town located on the Bhadra River in Karnataka.¹ Her parents were from a village and as a child Gowda used to spend holidays in the village where she observed women using cow-dung as part of their every day labour, collecting it for fuel or for ritual purposes with which to brown-wash their house walls or sculpt deities for blessing the daily work in the kitchen, or to clean the ground in front of their homes with a sanctifying cow-dung wash.² In an interview with Australian curator and critic Victoria Lynn, Gowda explained how she

¹ Bhadravati is today a mid sized town of approximately 150,000 inhabitants (1991 census). A 1981 census saw the population at ca. 53,000 so the town has seen rapid growth.

² This information was gleaned from a conversation with Sheela Gowda at her home and studio in Bangalore on April 26th 2002. Although Sheela Gowda is not adverse to me writing about her work, when I first visited her she specifically stated that she did not want me to tape our discussions. Instead I took notes. After visiting Sheela Gowda a second time, upon returning to the hotel and prompted by Dr. Astri Wright who asked me questions about the encounter, I spoke into a tape recorder recalling my conversation with Gowda. Whenever I cite Sheela Gowda, In Conversation, I am paraphrasing and drawing on my notes from April 26th 2002 as well as on my recollections on what we discussed on April 29th 2002.

In correspondence with the artist, Gowda strongly stated she did not want me to quote her on anything she said, for it could be taken and used out of context. This has presented me with an interesting problem. Intent on privileging the artist's voice for reasons expressed in the introduction, I have abided by her wishes and have subsumed her voice into the paraphrasing thereof. However, I have taken the liberty to insert her voice wherever it has become public property such as through newspaper, book or journal articles. This is particularly important to me because I feel it reflects the artist's agency. Finally Gowda stated that she wanted it made absolutely clear to the reader that this interpretation of her work is mine and may not necessarily represent hers.

was always in touch with village life growing up: “the village and its ethos has never been too far away, both my parents having been born in a village and carrying with them a language and mannerisms which remind me of it.”³ In addition, Gowda’s father is a folklorist and writer so as a child she was always surrounded by folk art and culture; today her father manages a folk museum 50 km southwest of Bangalore.⁴ Although she was exposed to village life through her heritage, when I talked to her she also stressed that she was not a village person, but rather someone who felt somewhat distanced from rural life and questioned where and how she fit into the landscape of India which is primarily rural.⁵ Today Gowda lives in a suburb which used to be a village but has now been swallowed up by Bangalore proper, and here Gowda still witnesses women working with cow-dung.⁶

Not only Gowda’s village connections, but her additional familiarity with folk art forms and media, and the fact that women around her are still using cow-dung in their everyday lives, would have played a large role in motivating her to adopt this material as a viable artistic medium when she felt oil and canvas could no longer adequately express what she wished to articulate. Cow-dung, a woman centered substance resonating with India’s pre- and post colonial histories which bears no colonial attachments in the art historical sense, would more satisfactorily articulate her concern over Hindu fundamentalism gaining in popularity, for the material excreted by a political icon, the holy cow, inherently speaks of power struggles, communal tension and violence, concerns Gowda wished to address.⁷

Education

Sheela Gowda first attended art school at Ken School of Art in Bangalore from 1974-79 where she graduated with a diploma in painting. Her dedicated art teacher R. M. Hadapad made a deep and lasting impression on the young student and when he passed

³ Victoria Lynn, “Dung Heap. Sensuality and Violence in the Art of Sheela Gowda” (*Art Asia Pacific*, 3:4 1994), 83. Victoria Lynn was at the time an art critic and curator from Australia who interviewed Gowda in November 1995, after the artist returned from the African Biennale. Lynn’s article is set up as an interview.

⁴ Sheela Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 26th, 2002

⁵ Sheela Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 26th, 2002.

⁶ Sheela Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 26th, 2002.

⁷ Victoria Lynn, “Dung Heap,” 80.

away, Gowda wrote a tender tribute to him called “Portrait of a Guru,” which was published in the *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore’s premier newspaper, on November 30th 2003.⁸ It offers insight not only into the life of a special man and his vision, but into an art environment which was influential in shaping Gowda’s approach to art and art making. I include Gowda’s article here not only for that reason alone, but also because this is a way to feature the artist’s voice, to defer the textual authority and to demonstrate her agency.

. . . Every inch of this rugged space is vibrant with the making and the materials of its structure: An 'edifice' to 'Arte Povera'. This is Ken School of Art. Its founder and architect R M Hadapad, lived and worked in it. The absence of the common sparrow and other small wild creatures living in close proximity with humans is mainly attributed to the lack of nesting areas. The urban, concrete structures do not allow for nooks and corners to happen.

Ken School of Art is not a concrete structure physically or metaphorically. Aspiring art students, artists, writers, theatre persons, musicians, or anyone who got remotely curious about art walked into it and their association with Art, Hadapad and Ken School never ended. He welcomed them all, anytime of the day or night. Its soothing neutrality nurtured their ideas, big or small.

It was never a surprise to walk into Ken School and find alongside the working art students, an informal music performance, a poetry recital, a theatre rehearsal, or a debate in progress. Hadapad questioned, teased, provoked, and encouraged others to do the same. Nothing said went without a retort, a rejoinder, an answer, a counter question.

Born in 1936 in Badami, North Karnataka, Rudrappa Mallappa Hadapad, retained with him the rustic air that he came from. His was the romantic tale of the boy who passionately wanted from an early age to become an artist. Bombay was at that time culturally the more accessible metro to pursue an artistic career. Dandavate Mutt, Minajigi, S.M.Pandit, who had studied in Bombay like Hadapad did later, were names I heard for the first time from him.

Hadapad initiated the modernist thinking on art in Karnataka. His teaching was not a textbook methodology; no serious art teaching can be that. He took the students along as he thought, worked and questioned.

Looking back to 30 years ago, as a student in Ken School of Art, I remember the feeling of coming home each time I entered its premises. We sketched furiously everything that presented itself before us. We rose at dawn to reach parks and railway stations to paint landscapes. Anyone who did not hold a pencil or a brush in hand was quickly posed as a 'life study' model before us. Any artist or personality exhibiting in the city or visiting, was invited to give a lecture, present their slides, and in return they were garlanded and quizzed by us at the instigation of Hadapad. By doing so, he was not just teaching us, he was quenching his own thirst for learning, satisfying his own curiosity. We became fellow searchers.

Thirty years ago art exams were still conducted under the Department of

⁸ In “Portrait of a Guru,” published in the *Deccan Herald* on Sunday November 30, 2003, Sheela Gowda pays homage to her guru (teacher) and the art school which instilled and fostered her love for the arts. <http://www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/nov30/at3.asp> (30 Jan 2004)

Secondary education. It had its advantages and disadvantages. It allowed for candidates to appear for exams and did not stipulate conventional systems of attendance. This suited Hadapad's bohemian nature perfectly.

Employed or retired men, married women, school adolescents, rural art aspirants, children, placed their attempts at expression, sketching, under his nose for his guidance at all times. There was an immediacy to their needs and Hadapad encouraged, and responded to it whether he was in the middle of his meals, or whether he was engaged in conversation with a visitor.

His skill filled us with awe and we tried to acquire it. A reproduction of a painting in an otherwise nondescript magazine was enough for Hadapad to launch into a long narrative on art, life and existence. He Inspired. What more can one expect from a guru.

Students, who went on to pursue their art studies in other art institutions all over India, were inevitably asked. "Who is this Hadapad who has taught you all? I would like to meet this remarkable teacher."

Hadapad came to Bangalore around 40 years ago. His was a symbiotic relationship to Badami not just as the place of his birth but as the cradle of chalukyan art and architecture. It coursed through his mind and heart. He therefore remained an immigrant to Bangalore, wanting to return to its peaceful history, each time his attempts at finding a stronger foothold for his institution failed, each time bureaucracy listened and then forgot his cry for giving art its proper and due importance.

He did not attempt to belong to Bangalore's other face: The commercial city, the galleries and its social circuit. Its language never became familiar to him.

It in turn never sought him.

Hadapad has returned to Badami and if we want him to return to this city again, this humanist and his art to inspire us all over again, we who have been introduced into this vast world of art by him would need to find new ways and means to continue the dialogue he has initiated. Perhaps we will be more successful if the interest and the will of politicians and bureaucracy sustains.⁹

Gowda describes her first school as a nurturing, anti-hierarchal, liberal, democratic and people oriented environment. Values such as non-discrimination against gender, caste, class or age were fostered and all art forms and expressions were equally welcome and actively encouraged. Not only did Gowda's teacher cultivate a love for learning as well as an active, critical and engaged mind, he also seems to have been an adherent to ideas spelled out in the *arte povera* movement, which include the desire to avoid creating art as a consumer product through seeking the patronage of commercial art galleries.

Arte povera "poor art" is an art movement which emerged in Italy in the late 1960s in reaction to the increased commercialization of the art market. It was coined to describe those artists who questioned "fine art" and the supremacy of painting, and who challenged traditional artistic practices. Instead they sought inspiration from science, folk

⁹ Sheela Gowda, "Portrait of a Guru," *Deccan Herald*, Bangalore: November 30, 2003, <http://www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/nov30/at3.asp> (30 Jan 2004)

art and the life forms and forces of nature. Their work “include[d] in its scope the use of the simplest material and natural elements (copper, zinc, earth, water, rivers, land, snow, fire, grass, air, stone, electricity. . .) for a description or representation of nature.”¹⁰ *Arte povera* artists experimented with different processes such as freezing or chemical reactions and explored sculptural forms through a wide range of unconventional media ranging from vegetables, soil, wool or silk, to live animals,¹¹ coal, marble and blown glass, often juxtaposing the most radically contrasting types of materials. The *arte povera* artists not only displayed innovative, as well as anti-hierarchical attitudes towards materials, they also flaunted radical social and political positions.¹²

Gowda, in describing her art school as an edifice to *arte povera*, was no doubt influenced by this art movement and its irreverent, yet inclusive approach to materials, which would have left lasting and viable options open for her. It would also have left her with a lasting ambivalence toward commercializing her work, selling herself as an artist, and promoting herself in order to pursue her love for art making.

After engaging with Hadapad’s ideas and approaches to art, materials and politics, Gowda then studied under Prof. K.G. Subramanyan, first at Baroda, and later at Vishwabharati University in Santiniketan north of Kolkata (Calcutta) in Bengal. Marta Jakimowicz-Karle notes that Subramanyan’s “stress on formal complexity dominated Gowda’s student work.”¹³ Not only is it Subramanyan thought of as one of India’s most influential teachers, the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda has a special identity on the map of schools in India; it is considered India’s premier art institution and the first of its kind to grant a university degree in fine arts.¹⁴ Like Hadapad, Subramanyan has been a unique instructor who holds the special place of mentor in many contemporary Indian artists’ affections. Deeply interested in cubism and modernism, he nonetheless also

¹⁰ Germano Celant, “Introduction,” in *Art Povera* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 225-30 reprinted in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 662-666.

¹¹ One exhibition included horses tethered in a gallery.

¹² <http://www.tate.org.uk/home/news/230301.htm> (14 April 2004).

¹³ Marta Jakimowicz-Karle, “About Things Sensual and Violent,” *the India magazine of her people and culture*, (May, 1993) 64-72. Jakimowicz-Karle is an indologist who has published works on Indian mythology in Polish. She produced an article on Sheela Gowda’s oil paintings for *the India magazine of her people and her culture* in 1993. At the time she was an art critic for the *Deccan Herald* in Bangalore.

¹⁴ The degree-granting program in fine arts at the university of Baroda was established in 1950. Neville Tuli, *The Flamed Mosaic, Contemporary Indian Painting* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1997), 232. Gulammohammed Sheikh, *Contemporary Art in Baroda* (New Delhi: Tilika, 1997), 55.

strongly encouraged his students to look to craft materials for inspiration and Gowda notes that unlike many artists who borrow from tradition as a revivalist or romantic gesture, he was able to make a link between folk art and contemporary art one that was vital and alive.¹⁵ Subramanyan is described by Indian art critic Geeta Kapur as “one of the most eminent artist-teachers in contemporary India [who] has elaborated on the uses of tradition in the making of art.”¹⁶ His pedagogy encouraged students to move beyond the “stale polarity in modernism” and consider the rich materiality and the “continuing actuality of traditional artisanal skills in India” an idea that Gowda, already primed through her background, later considered when she transferred her skill at oil paint to manipulating a traditional artistic medium.¹⁷

In 1985, Sheela Gowda received the Karnataka Lalith Kala Academy Award and between 1984-6, she was the recipient of an Inlaks Foundation Scholarship for Post Graduate Studies which allowed her to study at the Royal College of Art in London, where she completed her Master of Fine Arts degree in painting in 1986. Her instructors there included Peter de Francia, Mario Dubsky and Ken Kiff. Post London, Gowda worked in Paris for three months at Cité Internationale des Arts where she met her future husband, Swiss artist Christoph Storz.¹⁸ In 1998, she received the Sotheby’s prize for contemporary art in India for her works which employed cow-dung as a medium.

Exhibitions

Gowda started exhibiting early on in her career, participating in group shows at State Lalith Kala Academy Bangalore annual exhibitions in 1981, '82 and '85. She took part in the ‘National Exhibition’ in New Delhi in 1984, and in 1987 at the ‘Two Artists Show,’ Gallery 7, in Bombay. This was also the year of her first solo exhibition which was held at Venkatappa Art Gallery in Bangalore. Between 1987-9, Gowda was painting in Yelwala, a village near Mysore, and 1989 saw two further solo shows: one in Mysore, where her oil paintings on 5ft. x 6ft. canvas rendered bare the masked social violence,

¹⁵ Lynn, “Dung Heap,” 83.

¹⁶ Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism. Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 412. Geeta Kapur is an Indian art critic, author and curator.

¹⁷ Deepak Anath, “The knots are many, but the thread is one,” *Art Asia Pacific*, 3:4, 1996, 85-89.

¹⁸ Sheela Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 26th 2002.

particularly concerning women, which she saw in the semi rural environment of Yelwala.¹⁹ The other solo exhibition took place at Gallery 7 in Bombay where she also simultaneously participated in a group show 'Timeless Art' at Victoria Terminus. In 1993, a third solo show 'Anatomy of Sacrilege' at Gallery Chemould, Bombay, offered a venue to display her new works created with cow-dung and other materials.

By the 1990s, Gowda was exhibiting internationally as well as nationally, first showing work in Aarau, Switzerland in 1991, then at 'Tangente,' in Schaffhausen, Switzerland (1994) and later, in 1995, at 'Africus,' the South African Biennale, in Johannesburg. In 1995, she also participated in an international workshop and exhibition called 'Art and Nature' at Buddha Jayanti Park in New Delhi in which she constructed a village space replete with cow-dung pats inscribed with gold, representing never ending sources of energy.²⁰ In 1996, she took part in 'Traditions / Tensions,' a show of twenty-seven South, South-East and East Asian artists launched in New York by the Asia Society where she exhibited in the Grey Gallery at New York University cow-dung relief paintings inscribed with gold leaf and *kumkum* powder.²¹ Since then Gowda has exhibited in numerous places and her renown is growing: 'Telling Tales,' Victoria Gallery in Bath, England, in 1997; 'Private Mythologies,' the Japan arts foundation in Tokyo in 1998; 'Tales of Six Cities,' Lakeeren Gallery, Bombay and 'Peep-Peep Bangalore,' Jayamahal Palace, Bangalore in 1999; 'Drawing Space,' Beaconsfield Gallery, London; and Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, England both in 2000-1; 'Sites of Recurrence' at Boras Museum in Sweden in 2003; 'How Latitudes Become Form' at Walker Art Gallery in Minneapolis, USA in 2003 and in Turin, Italy, 2003; and 'Cabin Baggage' at World Social Forum in Bombay, in 2004, to name just a few. 2003 was a particularly busy year for Gowda with international exhibitions in the USA, Ireland, Sweden and Italy, as well as national shows in Chennai and in Bangalore. If the Internet is any indication for the growth and popularity of an artist, when I first starting research on Gowda in 2001, I was

¹⁹ Sheela Gowda, Correspondence, February 6th 2004.

²⁰ http://www.google.ca/search?q=cache:jHOb71SUUK8J:www2.kahbonn.de/fo/erde/kongress/biograf_e.pdf+%27sheela+gowda%22+telling+tales&hl=en&ie=UTF-8 (10th Jan. 2004)

²¹ Kumkum is red vermillion powder used by women in ritual.

lucky to find fifteen sites listing the artist. Today, in 2004, there are over one hundred. For a complete list of exhibitions see Appendix I.

Early Work

When Gowda moved away from materials associated with the high arts to adopt a highly non-conventional painting and sculpting medium, she also made the transition from being a figurative painter to an object-based artist.²² This meant that her art was now no longer confined to two dimensions and framed by the edge of a canvas but could leap beyond these boundaries and, molded into sculptural forms such as bricks, plaques or cow-dung pats, could become objects in space. The gallery would henceforth act as the frame. But Gowda also experimented with cow-dung using it as a painting medium thinned down and applied as a dung coloured wash on jute or paper. In doing so, she still used aspects of the figure as reference. Although Gowda's figurative work had slowly been dispersing into abstraction, through this shift in materials she embraced abstraction and a minimalist aesthetic, to emphasize, through the simplification of form, the substance she now chose to work.²³ In other words, the figure was still important but no longer vital in transmitting meaning; the material itself could now also convey multiple layers of signification.

Prior to this Gowda had been using the traditional oil and canvas increasingly as a vehicle with which to comment on the tension between "violence and sensuality,"²⁴ a philosophical preoccupation which also expressed itself in the fragmentation, isolation, immobility, and inability of her rendered subjects to communicate effectively.²⁵ Her fluidly painted humans had, through the gestural brushstrokes, almost lost themselves in the merging backgrounds and foregrounds. Gowda states: "The figure gradually became

²² This is of course only non-conventional to a euro-centric audience and in the western art historical sense.

²³ This shift was apparent when Gowda showed me slides of her previous work and talked about how oil and paint were no longer adequate for expressing what she wanted to say. Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 26th 2002.

²⁴ Lynn, "Dung Heap," 80. Gowda states how her earlier paintings were dealing with violence and its relationship to sensuality, which Gowda continued to explore in her later cow-dung works as well (Gowda, correspondence, 23 Jan, 2004.)

²⁵ Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 26th 2002.

smaller and evolved into a kind of figurative abstraction.”²⁶ On the verge of dissolving into their environments, they acquired a still, almost inert quality, as if they were mere shells of their former selves (figures 1 –6). Among these figures Gowda interspersed animals, which, she told me, took on the role of communicating emotions the human subjects were suppressing.²⁷ They are the more active elements, replacement symbols expressing grief, by, for example, howling at the sight of a corpse as the frozen human mourners stand by, incapable of acting. Marta Jakimowicz-Karle writing on these oil paintings suggests that

In semi urban Yelwala, life was observed in all its dirt, shabbiness and violence, especially violence meted out to women. Drastic happenings occurred in full daylight and with or without the participation of indifferent spectators occupied by routine engagements. Gowda’s maidservant there became a concrete example and epitome of the slogging, helpless woman, exploited, abused and beaten. Scarcity of water made the well, the centre of such women’s lives – a source of sustenance and an escape in death. *Ascension at Noon* [see figure 6] has all this – a matter-of-fact and masochistic man hits a falling, blood –red sari, a well bleeds, a woman who is about to throw herself into the water is received by a heavenly apparition, a dog looks on as if nothing has happened, a woman is scrubbing grimy utensils, another woman hanging out washing seems to clutch hopelessly at a void. The exploding reds and yellows are positioned in saturated contrast and divided-strengthened by piercing illumination. They fall into a composition ruled by disrupted crossing diagonals and vast vertical columns.²⁸

Although masked violence was already present in these paintings,²⁹ at this point in Gowda’s artistic career, when the rendered figures were fragmenting and evolving into human abstractions, the artist, spurred by the violence of the Hindu / Muslim clashes, turned to the ancient ritual and folk art medium of cow-dung to comment on the nature of violence and the odd convergence of the ‘sensual’ present in acts of cruelty.³⁰

It was a radical move. Not only was Gowda emphatically rejecting the western imported ‘holy cow’ model of high art, canvas and oil, as an appropriate mode of expression, she was also embracing a substance considered filthy by some and sacred by others, as a response to the violence of the Bombay riots of 1989 and the Hyderabad riots

²⁶ Lynn, “Dung Heap,” 80.

²⁷ Sheela Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002.

²⁸ Marta Jakimowicz-Karle. “About Things Sensual and Violent,” *the India magazine of her people and culture*, May, 1993, 64-72.

²⁹ Sheela Gowda, Email correspondence, January 22, 2004.

³⁰ Sheela Gowda, Correspondence, January 23, 2004.

of 1990.³¹ Most people, especially in urban spaces, would never dream of getting their hands dirty with excrement and manipulating into art, yet within India's cultural context, many consider cow-dung a viable artistic medium as well as material that resonates with ideas of sanctity. Cow-dung is an especially fitting substance to manipulate into art which comments on political riots and violence, because it is emitted by the holy cow who is increasingly invested with right wing rhetoric. In turning to cow-dung, Gowda was particularly reacting to what she perceived as the underlying gloating, sensationalist, sensually driven, perhaps even sadistic pleasure gleaned not only in the media's daily reports on these acts of terror, but also in how the rioters were committing atrocities against innocents.³² She was maybe responding to that slippery convergence of the sensual and violence so often explored and exploited in film and through the media when acts of terror are 'sensitized' by being played back again and again, in slow motion, and from all angles. These moments in time, which become framed and fragmented through the camera, are gloated upon consumed, internalized. Through repetition the viewer becomes increasingly detached and the acts of violence assuming abstract and remote forms, gain in sensual beauty. Riots were later also to shake her hometown Bangalore when, with the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, thousands across India took to the streets and were killed.

In an interview conducted at the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis in the spring of 2003, Gowda discusses how she turned to cow-dung as an artistic medium after reconsidering "her reasons for painting."³³ Like the country and the violence erupting around her she too had "reached a crisis point" and felt the need to "investigate what was happening around [her]." The "biggest motivation" for abandoning oil paint was provoked by "Hindu fundamentalism . . . gaining ground" which, Gowda states, "was extremely frightening to all of us." Today she sees "nuances" of "this kind of fundamentalism, not just religious fundamentalism, [but] nationalism and fascism, all

³¹ Lynn, "Dung Heap," 80.

³² Sheela Gowda, email correspondence, January 23, 2004.

³³ Sheela Gowda, On-line interview. February, 2003, Walker Center for the Arts. This on-line interview with Sheela Gowda was conducted at the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis in 2003, where Gowda's "And Tell Him of my Pain" and "Private Gallery" were on display from February through May, 2003. <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/exhibition/> All following excerpts are taken from this on-line interview. (3 June 2003)

kinds of fascisms. . . happening all over the world.”³⁴ As such, her art really cannot be read in isolation to what is going on world wide, but due to the material employed, it is India specific. Gowda states

Cow-dung, which is the material I have used predominantly in the last ten years, has religious connotations; it is considered sacred on the one level – so I was beginning to investigate the way I could subvert these meanings to say what I had to say about the political / social situation that I was responding to. . . It was a compulsion for that time and it still continues to be.³⁵

Gowda’s move away from oil was a reaction to the restriction of that medium; she felt painting was too limiting in its expression and she wanted her work to carry more weight than merely oil paint transferred into illusionistic form; she required the material itself to bear meaning.³⁶ This urge had become more pressing as the riots ripped into India’s social fabric revealing the tense relations between religious factions and exposing the fragility, uncertainty and violence simmering underneath Hindu religious sentiments.³⁷ In an environment of communal tension, people never know when and where violence will strike next. In the interview with Victoria Lynn, Gowda states:

I wanted to say certain things I felt were limited by the medium. It became narrow and I had to work out something that would have meaning in terms of the material and not just in the forms that I used within the painting. This need became rather urgent after the riots and with what was happening to the social fabric around us.³⁸

Gowda knew she was dealing with a sensitive matter, but as an artist she felt she needed to react and act.³⁹ Turning to cow-dung fit. Amidst the general unrest of the population, the women in her Bangalore suburb, a village which has steadily been encroached upon by a city bursting at its seams, continued to plaster cow-dung patties against the walls around houses, along lanes and streets for fuel, and to draw *Rangoli*, sacred designs inscribed upon the ground of their homes for protection.

As an artist Gowda is interested in tension, whether this tension be that between violence and sensuality, between unexpressed and expressed emotions, or between a symbol of non-violence and its appropriation by a violent Hindu faction.⁴⁰ She is also

³⁴ Sheela Gowda, On-line interview. February, 2003, Walker Center for the Arts.

³⁵ Sheela Gowda, On-line interview. February, 2003, Walker Center for the Arts.

³⁶ As chapters two and three will demonstrate, cow-dung is invested with multiple meanings.

³⁷ Lynn, “Dung Heap,” 80.

³⁸ Lynn, “Dung Heap,” 80.

³⁹ Sheela Gowda, In Conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002.

⁴⁰ This will be discussed in more detail in chapter five

interested in the tension caused by the juxtaposition of two radically different materials, cow-dung and gold leaf, or the tension underlying Hindu myth and ritual. When she turned to working with cow-dung, she did so acknowledging the tension inherent in the material, its rich complexity, and the multi-layered historiography of the medium she was about to carry into the “sacred” high art setting of the contemporary art gallery world. Gowda “realised that there was this whole visual material out there which wasn’t necessarily ‘high culture;’ it was extremely rich but not mainstream.”⁴¹ In using this medium she “has tried to identify with the millions of women who use it in their everyday lives,” yet at the same time she has subverted its traditional applications and has created tensions within the gallery setting between the every day and the high arts, and between the ephemeral and the permanent.⁴² In so doing she has also created tension within the art historical canon itself.

The following two chapters will reveal how cow-dung is sociologically, symbolically, historically, ritualistically, and religiously inscribed and charged with meaning relating to religious ritual, economics, women’s work, role and position, and caste relations, in order to lay a solid foundation for Gowda’s work and one that may not be readily apparent to a western audience.

⁴¹ Sheela Gowda in an interview with Suman Gopinath in Sarah Campbell and Grant Watson eds. *Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing: Sheela Gowda, N.S. Harsha, Nasreen Mohamedi* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2000), 54.

⁴² Campbell and Watson *Drawing Space*, 54.

Chapter Two

Cow Goddesses, Divine Interceptors and Cow by-products in Sacred Contexts

"These machines are milking the cows," Amma said, affirming what her eyes were seeing. "How did people learn to do this? What kind of place is this where machines milk the cows, where farmers take milk without invoking Laxmi? Cows are Laxmi, the Goddess of Wealth, the mother of all living things.

Laxmi grazes the grass of the forest by day and, with almost no care on our part, look what she produces: milk to drink, butter for lamps and for cooking, urine for medicine and ritual. And manure for fertilizer and for mixing with clay to plaster our floors, which protects our houses from snakes. Oxen plow our fields, and by hanging onto a cow's tail at death we are saved from being dragged to Hell. No part of the cow goes to waste." ¹

* * *

Any act or choice can be driven by ambiguous or intentional motivations and any interpretation is a choice between several possible directions and types of discourses. When Sheela Gowda chooses cow-dung as a painting and sculpting medium in a time of political and religious repression and violence, she may be flinging dung in the face of the ruling elite. She may be operating at a more subtle level, creating works that slip quietly by the unsuspecting viewer, but jump out at the informed analyst as jagged with the kinds of contradictory combinations that in sum signal sarcasm fuelled by anger. Such artistic approaches are methods familiar to audiences of the 'west' for the last five decades. However, in Sheela Gowda's very choice of material and her choice to create works which can connect and affect us with their transcendent beauty, Gowda is also doing something that most art lovers beyond India have little access to knowing about: she is connecting with ancient Indian ideas around abundance, fertility, purity and sanctity.

¹ Excerpts from Broughton Coburn's *Amma in America. A Pilgrimage of the Heart* (Delhi: Book Faith India, 2000), 249. Amma, a Nepalese woman, was 84 years old when she visited the United States with Broughton Coburn.

In the early 1990s, Sheela Gowda adopted a substance which is not only used within multiple contexts, but which also reverberates with the idea of the divine feminine and with the living mythology present within India's sacred landscape. This chapter explores some of the levels of meaning inherent within cow-dung by providing a historical background of the cow and how she is conceived of in Hinduism and by the populace in general. In this chapter I introduce the Vedic idea of Sri and the cow goddesses, investigate cow legends, temple building and the importance of the cow's presence at temple sites, and discuss the numerous contexts in which cow-dung is used in religious ritual and art to provide the reader with a greater understanding of the socio-religious foundations and meanings inherent within Gowda's work even if these are not directly voiced by the artist.

Vedic Cow Goddesses, Usas, Vac and Aditi

In Hinduism the cow is thought of as *gomata*, the divine cow mother. This idea is not unique to India; evidence suggests that the cow in conjunction with the goddess played a vital role in the lives of the people in "prehistoric" Europe, Africa and Eurasia as well, before her importance to our cosmology was gradually forgotten.² In India, however, even as patriarchy structured women's lives, the feminine aspect of the divine was never lost, nor were the meanings of the cow as mother and creatrix. In spite of patriarchal developments in social and religious institutions and the dominance of male gods in the Vedic religion,³ the Vedas, believed to have been composed approximately around 1500 BCE,⁴ occasionally speak of goddesses, and some of them are glossed as

² There is substantial evidence visible in Egyptian art that Isis, Hathor, Nut, Bat and Neith were envisioned and represented as cow goddesses, Fekri A. Hassan, "The Earliest Goddesses of Egypt," *Ancient Goddesses, The Myths and the Evidence*, Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, eds (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), in Sumer and Mesopotamia, see Deryck O. Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places: Origins and Survivals of Animal Homes in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), implied through excavations and archeological digs, see Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), James Mellaart, *Catal Hüyük, A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (New York: 1967), as well as through mythology see Lynda Welch, *Goddess of the North* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 2001); Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Jacques Cauvin, *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture* (Cambridge: 2000).

³ Upendra Nath Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi: Origin and Development* (New Delhi, 1978), 3.

⁴ Scholars estimate this date. The Vedas are texts composed and passed down orally. A.L Basham and Kenneth G. Zysk, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism* (Boston: Beacon Press 1989) 7.

cows.⁵ In the *Atharva Veda*, the texts recited and remembered as the medical cures and the ancient book of medicine,⁶ a poem praises the cow:

Worship to thee, springing to life, and worship to thee when born!
 Worship, O Cow, to thy tail-hair, and to thy hooves, and to thy form!
 Hitherward we invite with prayer the Cow who pours a thousand streams,
 By whom the heaven, by whom the earth, by whom these waters are preserved. . .
 Forth from thy mouth the songs came, from thy neck's nape sprang strength,
 O Cow.
 Sacrifice from thy flanks was born, and rays of sunlight from thy teats.
 From thy fore-quarters and thy thighs motion was generated, Cow!
 Food from thine entrails was produced, and from thy belly came the plants. . .
 They call the Cow immortal life, pay homage to the Cow as Death.
 She hath become this universe, Father, and Rishis, hath become the gods,
 and men, and Spirits.
 The man who hath this knowledge may receive the Cow with welcoming.
 So for the giver willingly doth perfect sacrifice pour milk. . .
 The Cow is Heaven, the Cow is Earth, the Cow is Vishnu, Lord of Life.
 The heavenly beings have drunk the out-pourings of the Cow,
 They in the bright One's dwelling-place pay adoration to her milk.
 For soma some have milked her: some worship the fatness she hath poured.
 They who have given a Cow to him who hath this knowledge have gone up to the
 third region of the sky.
 He who hath given a Cow unto the Brahmans winneth all the worlds.
 For Right is firmly set in her, devotion, and religious zeal.
 Both Gods and mortal men depend for life and being on the Cow.
 She hath become this universe: all that the Sun surveys is she.⁷

During the Vedic period cows were regarded as mothers of gods and creation and the Aryan gods were sometimes described as “cow-born, gojatah.”⁸ One of the cow goddesses mentioned in these earliest of the Vedic texts, the Rig-Veda is Usas. She is conceived as the goddess of dawn whose early morning rays are compared to milk

⁵ Kinsley notes that the goddesses are only mentioned as frequently in the Vedas as gods of secondary status implying that they were not as significant as the primary male gods, at least not to those reciting the Vedas. David R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

⁶ Harold Coward, “Lecture on the Veda,” Victoria: University of Victoria, January 12th 2004. Kim Knott, *Hinduism. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: UP, 1998, reissued 2000), 16 describes the Atharva Veda as containing spells and charms. Ainslie T. Embree ed., *The Hindu Tradition. Readings in Oriental Thought* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 5 explains how this text is believed to draw on “very ancient material’ less concerned with ritual and more with the problems and lives of ordinary people.

⁷ Atharva Veda X:10, quoted and revised in Embree ed., *The Hindu Tradition*, 40-41.

⁸ Asis Sen, *Animal Motifs in Ancient Indian Art* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1972), 61. *Go*, Sanskrit for cow has various translations. When it is both masculine and feminine *go* means: cattle; produce of a cow; the stars; the thunderbolt; the sky; a ray of light; a diamond. In its feminine form *go* means: a bow; the earth; a mother; speech; a quarter of the compass; water (pl.) the eye; an arrow. In its masculine form it refers to: a bull; the hair of the body; an organ of sense; the sign Taurus of the zodiac, the sun; the number nine; an arrow. Vasudeo Govind Apte, *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary, Sanskrit – English* (New York: Hippocrene books, Inc, 1996), 129.

streaming forth from her udder to illuminate the world with ribbons of light. Associated with the beginning of time, she is not only described as a cow,⁹ but also likened to a cow for she “yields her udder for the benefit of people.”¹⁰ She is also linked to breath, the first involuntary action a baby takes, as it enters this world.¹¹ She gives life and strength and drives away darkness and evil demons. The Rg-veda calls her the mother of cows and of the gods. As dawn, Ushas functions as the eye of the gods, and as a goddess associated with time; as such she is known as the “mistress or marker of time.”¹²

Vac, the mother goddess of sound, is also likened to a cow.¹³ She declares: “I, Vâch, [am] the skilled in speech, who assist[s] all pious practices, - I, the divine cow, [have] come from the gods, . . .”¹⁴ Vac, “a feminine word,” is here compared to a cow, because she gave birth to things through naming them and in not only naming and creating, but in also providing, she is thought of as a cow bestowing humans and gods alike with sustenance.¹⁵ Pintchman notes that “the bovine symbolism of Vac also reappears in Brhadaranyaka Upanisad 5.8, where it is said that one should revere Vac as a cow.”¹⁶

Finally Aditi is identified as the cosmic cow whose name translates as “freedom,” or boundless. She is thought of as not only heaven, but as that which lies beyond “free from bonds . . . of space and time.”¹⁷ Brockington interprets Aditi as representing “ideas of breadth and boundlessness throughout the free, limitless space of the universe, combined with the inner space of the gods.”¹⁸ Doniger O’Flaherty describes Aditi as “the cosmic origin of space itself.”¹⁹ Even before the word was uttered, brought into being through Vac, it first had to manifest in the limitless, boundless region of space beyond mind, as exemplified by Aditi.

⁹ Ragozin, *Vedic India*, 226.

¹⁰ (Rg-veda 3.58) Kinsley *Hindu Goddesses*, 7.

¹¹ (Rg-veda 1.113.12) Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 7.

¹² Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 8.

¹³ See footnote 8 on how mother and cow may be interchangeable.

¹⁴ Zanaide A. Ragozin, *Vedic India* (Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1961), 272.

¹⁵ André Padoux, *Vac*, (Albany: SUNY UP, 1990), 7.

¹⁶ Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (New York: SUNY UP, 1994), 57.

¹⁷ Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess*, 34.

¹⁸ J. L. Brockington, *The Sacred Thread: A Short History of Hinduism* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), 18.

¹⁹ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1980), 79.

Surabhī and Kāmadhenu

Cows and cow goddesses occurring in the later Hindu pantheon are Kamadhenu, Surabhi, and Lakshmi. They are partially conceived of in the Vedas but brought to fuller expression in the Puranas, addenda to the great Vedic texts which are filled with stories of today's popular gods.²⁰ Surabhi is referred to as the cosmic cow and as the mother of cows; in her various appellations she is also known as Savala, Kama-duh and Kamadhenu, but iconographically these two appear as distinctively different cows.²¹ Kamadhenu is depicted as a cow who, in addition to her udder, has wings, a woman's face and women's breasts (figure 7). Kamadhenu, like Lakshmi, was born when the gods, the *devas*, with the help of their enemies, the *asuras*, were churning the great ocean of milk to extract the divine nectar *amrita*, the elixir of immortal life.²² Doniger O'Flaherty writes:

The magic wishing-cow is the earth milked of good and evil substances by gods and demons. She is churned out of the ocean of milk; and the ocean of milk from which all else is churned forth, in turn flows from the udder of the wishing-cow.²³

Kamadhenu, a popular cow goddess, is thought of as the divine wish-fulfilling cow who delights in the pleasure of giving.²⁴

Surabhi, the cow representing the mother of the universe, is not only believed to house in the landscape of her body all deities and their numerous incarnations as well as the sages, but also the elements, the sun, moon and the earth itself. In figure 8, a popular devotional image available for purchase outside temples (at least in south India, where I saw it), the outline of the cow functions as a window into the cosmos. The sun is placed

²⁰ According to some scholars, the aim of the Puranas was to impart the complex philosophical teachings of the Vedas in language that was more easily understood by the ordinary person, even though the transmissions were in Sanskrit. It is believed the puranas were created after the Mahabharata between 300 CE to 900 CE. Knott *Hinduism*, 16.

Embree interprets the Puranas as a class of texts "included in the canon of scripture, although of a lesser degree of sanctity and authority" than the Vedas (208). They are "sacred history" and no doubt include some factual history, but "their general scope and intention is . . . fundamentally unhistorical." They function to "create a picture of the universe" and it is "through them, rather than through the great Vedic texts, that the basic ideas of Hinduism were communicated" (Embree 208). Knott refers to the Puranas as mythological texts taught by sages and remembered, *smṛiti*, by their disciples (14).

²¹ John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature*, (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1973), 193.

²² Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton: UP, 1992), 176.

²³ Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other*, 241. (Mahabharata 1.23.50; Ramayana 7.23.21)

²⁴ Muthu Kumaraswamy, Personal Interview, Chennai: National Folklore Institute, April 17th 2002.

above the cow's right eye, the moon is on the brow of her left, the mountains grow within her ankles, and her hooves are designated to Aditi, the earth goddess. Shiva sits between her eyes brandishing his trident while Ganesha and Murugan²⁵ are depicted below him, above the cow's muzzle.²⁶ Saraswati plays her *veena*²⁷ in an area selected to represent the intestines, Agni, located above the cow's stomach, breathes fire beside her, Vishnu resides in the cow's chest, Ganga sits in the flank of the cow's back, Lakshmi is located in the rump and Nagarajan, the snake, slithers up her tail. Usually a figure is shown in the cow's udder bathing in milk.

In addition, various other gods, sages and ideas are depicted within the body of this sacred cow mother. According to Radha Kalyanaraman, anger resides in the kidney, intelligence in the liver and sorrow in the ovum; the mind is in the heart; the idea of space is seen in the power and strength of the cow; summer lives in the bones of the shoulder; the heavenly and celestial beings are in her anus; the hairs of the body are the various medicines and "the roots of its hairs [are] the holy ascetics;" death dwells in the bone marrow; the thundering clouds are located within the cells of her udder; pure joy is depicted when the cow turns her back and both the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes²⁸ are located in her buttocks.²⁹ This heavenly cow dwells within an idealized landscape depicting both a lake and mountains behind her and portraying a young calf at her feet. In the blue heavens above, the Hindu trinity, Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva benevolently look on as they bestow their blessings upon the mortals gazing at them. Lakshmi, although

²⁵ Muragan is the Tamil term for Kartikeya, the warrior God, also known as Skanda and Subramaniam. He is Ganesha's brother.

²⁶ Stephen Huyler, *Meeting God. Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999), 265.

²⁷ A veena is a stringed musical instrument.

²⁸ Hindu society was originally based on four "castes," (a term introduced by the Portuguese) or varnas, social classes, designations meant to distinguish professions. The sudras were the servants, artisans and labourers, the Vaishyas, the merchants and traders, the Kshatriyas the warriors and kings, and the Brahmins the priests, scholars and teachers. The male Vaishyas, Kshatriyas and Brahmins were distinguished from the Sudras because they could be twice born. This occurred during their initiation ceremony, *upanayana* in which they received a sacred thread and which allowed them to recite the Vedas.

Kim Knott, *Hinduism. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: UP, 1998, reissued 2000), 19.

²⁹ Radha Kalyanaraman, "Sacred Cows." *Mindatlas.com*
http://www.heathekids.net/course.phtml?course_id=564 10 October, 2003.

depicted sitting in the cow's rump, is actually thought to reside in her dung which symbolizes fertility, wealth and abundance.³⁰

Śrī and Lakshmi

The idea of Lakshmi was partially conceived of in the Vedas and brought to fuller expression in the Puranas. Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and fortune is associated with the Vedic idea of *Sri*. Sri (Shree) is an essence compared to the goodness of cow's milk.³¹ Sri is thought to transmit good things such as wealth, light, beauty, and good fortune. In the Atharva Veda (12, 1, 6, 3), Sri is connected with "growth and material prosperity."³² A person believed to "have attained Sri is called *purisya*, rich in manure, or loose earth," a substance connoting potentiality, warmth, moisture, fertility and manifesting itself in growth, abundance and good fortune.³³

In chapter two of the *Khilas*, an appendix of the Rg Veda, Sri and Lakshmi are described as two separate entities, yet invocations to the goddesses portray them both iconographically, and in relation to their capabilities, in similar terms. Indeed today Lakshmi is often referred to as Sri-Lakshmi.³⁴ The mere presence of Lakshmi, cloaked in lotus flowers, and "radiant as the moon. . . bestows gold [and] milchcattle."³⁵ Sri too, seated on a lotus and appearing "radiant as the moon," is prayed upon to "bestow fame and prosperity."³⁶ The bountiful Sri is recognized by her odour, for "she lives in cow dung."³⁷ In later Hindu mythology Lakshmi is also identified as the goddess who lives in

³⁰Vandana Shiva, explains how "in India we worship cow-dung as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The famous festival of Gobur-dhan puja is literally the occasion to worship gobur (cow-dung) dhan (wealth)." Vandana Shiva, "The Cow Economy," Resurgence, Issue 217, March / April 2003 <http://resurgence.gn.apc.org/issues/shiva217.htm>. (2 June 2003). Dr. Shiva is director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, New Delhi, India Vandana Shiva is a physicist, philosopher and activist. Her books include *Water Wars*, *Monoculture of the Mind*, *Globalisation and Terrorism*, and she is co-author of *An Ecological History of Food and Farming in India*

³¹ Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi*, 12.

³² Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi*, 22.

³³ Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi*, 26.

³⁴ Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 19.

³⁵ Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi*, 51.

³⁶ Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi* 51 –2.

³⁷ Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi*, 52.

dung and as “The One Who Possesses Dung,” in other words she possesses all those beneficial attributes that will help her devotees attain sri.³⁸

Upon finding no dwelling place within the cosmic cow, where all the other gods had taken up abode, Lakshmi was forced to move in to an extension of the divine cow, her dung.

The goddess of fortune went to the cows and asked to dwell within them; though they at first refused, since she was so inconsistent and fickle, she [Lakshmi] insisted that no part of their bodies was disgusting, and the cows agreed to let her dwell in their urine and dung.³⁹

In later texts it appears that the goddess, far from being forced to dwell in dung, willingly takes up residence in this potent, life affirming substance.⁴⁰ According to one puranic legend, Lakshmi was born when the universe was created in the sixth *Kalpa*.⁴¹ As mentioned before, this feat was accomplished by churning the great ocean of milk from which the gods were trying to extract the immortal elixir *amrita*.⁴² Of the many treasures contained within the shimmering ocean of milk, described as “radiant as the thin and shining clouds of autumn,” was the goddess Lakshmi who arose from the cosmic sea to reside from this day forth with (Vishnu) Narayana.⁴³ It is possible that as his consort, and through her *shakti*,⁴⁴ or as *prakriti* personified, she animated the dormant lotus and stimulated its emergence from Vishnu’s navel. The flower bore Brahma the creator, who

³⁸ Kinsley notes that this aspect of Sri remains an important one among villagers today where “women are reported to worship Sri in the form of cow-dung on certain occasions.” Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 21.

³⁹ Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other*, 49. A verse from the Mahabharata 13.81 1-26.

⁴⁰ During Divali, the festival dedicated to Lakshmi, it is common for villagers to visit the dung hill where they “fall prostrate and beg [of the goddess] to fertilize their lands and to procure abundant crops. In the Decan and in Orissa the heap of cowdung is also worshiped by every householder on this day.” Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 33, quoting Dhal, *Goddess Lakshmi*, 176.

⁴¹ Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 17. One kalpa is considered one day of Brahma, the equivalent of 4.32 million years.

⁴² Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 176. Ragozin notes, that the Soma drink is “the earthly imitation” of this food of the gods (*Vedic India*), 187.

⁴³ <http://www.indiadvine.com/lakshmi-narayana1-y.htm>, 14 July 2002. Vishnu is often depicted slumbering on the great cosmic serpent Shesha who symbolizes the cosmic waters of creation. Eventually he sprouts a single lotus from his navel, “the highest form or aspect of earth. . . It is the goddess earth, or moisture” (Zimmer, 52). The creator god Brahma sits on this lotus ready to start another cycle of creation. This fluid mass of pre- or in-between cycles of creation recalls the ocean of milk, which upon being churned brought forth among other things Lakshmi and the cosmic cow. The lotus symbolizes moisture and the earth and recalls elements attributed to Sri and later to Lakshmi. Lakshmi is often paired with Vishnu; she is thought as his wife. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton: UP, 1992), 52 & 76.

⁴⁴ Shakti is a term which describes female power or female energy.

as the universal architect constructed another cycle of creation.⁴⁵ Figure 10 demonstrates how Lakshmi is usually conceived of today, surrounded by all the good things most people desire.

Lakshmi is not only celebrated as light and associated with bounty, prosperity, beauty and good fortune, she is also likened to a cow, and indeed often regarded as the sacred cow. Fuller notes: “the cow is frequently, although not invariably or exclusively, identified as an image of Lakshmi, or as Lakshmi herself.”⁴⁶ That is why, Lodrick reports how he observed a woman lowering herself to her knees and bowing down, “pressing her forehead to the dusty ground,” to honour the divinity manifested as the holy cow, when a herd marking a festival passed by.⁴⁷

From the above mentioned descriptions of the goddesses identified as cows in the Vedas, it is clear that cows are not only thought of as great creatrices and are associated with the space of existence before time or between the cycles of creation, as well as with the fertile, cosmic waters of creation, cow-dung also resonates with these ideas for it signifies renewal of the potential for fertility, growth and abundance, at all levels of material and spiritual life. When Gowda smears dung onto paper or manipulates it into a sculptural form, she is working with a substance rich in cosmic symbolism and one which has significant meaning in the agricultural realm as well.

The Cow as Mother / Father / Earth

Although cows are usually thought of as female, both gender and states of manifestation are relatively fluid in Puranic folklore; gods, as well as other entities, shape-shift and often reverse gender roles. The creator God Brahma assumed the form of a cow in order to allow his children, the humans on earth, to taste celestial nectar.⁴⁸ Because the substance was too strong for them to consume directly, Brahma drank some himself, transformed into a cow and fed his children the tempered celestial substance

⁴⁵ Embree, *The Hindu Tradition*, 210. According to Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi another feature that emerged from this great ocean of milk were magic wishing cows (107).

⁴⁶ C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame* (Princeton, 1992), 59.

⁴⁷ Deryck O Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places: Origins and Survivals of Animal Homes in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 13.

⁴⁸ R. N. Saletore, *Encyclopedia of Indian Culture*, Volume II (E-K), (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1982, repr. 1989), 483.

through his milk.⁴⁹

When Brahma shape-shifted to manifest as a cow, he foamed at the mouth. The foam, like other cow by-products, is assigned varying degrees of sanctity. It fell on a *Sivalingam* (a *lingam* is an aniconic representation of the god Shiva shaped like a phallus) and Shiva, perceiving it as nectar, was delighted. Today the foam of a cow's mouth is considered as "sacred as nectar itself,"⁵⁰ but Jha, an author whose book was banned from publication in India due to its 'controversial' nature, contends this notion.⁵¹ According to his findings, everything about the cow is considered pure except her mouth.⁵² He believes the idea around the unsanitary cow's mouth was developed in post-Vedic India and especially by the law-giver Manu in the Dharmasastras. The law books state that if a cow even smells food, the fare must be purified.⁵³ Jha argues that the puranas, in attempting to offer an explanation for the seemingly contradictory impurity of a cow's mouth when everything else about her is held to be sacred, describe how Vishnu cursed Kamadhenu, declaring her tail holy and her mouth impure.⁵⁴ Jha pronounces this myth a "Brahmanical concoction . . . intended to rationalize the Dharmasastric view for which there appears no logical basis."⁵⁵

In spite of varying degrees of sanctity afforded to parts of this bovid deity, cows are valued both as aspects of the divine mother, father and as animals capable of transforming vegetation into valuable physical sustenance, namely milk, but their by-products additionally resonate with symbolic significance. Both the cow and her by-products are symbols invested with fluid multiplicity, an aspect Sheela Gowda was not unaware of when she adopted cow-dung as an artistic medium.

⁴⁹ The earth also underwent a radical transformation when she turned into a cow. According to the Vishnupurana, Brahma asked her to provide a coat of vegetation for the planet. "Under the guise of the cow" she agreed to do so and thus generated all living crops. Margul, "Present Day Worship of the Cow, 64. Vishnupurana (1:13)

⁵⁰ Ayyar, *South Indian Festivities*, 20.

⁵¹ The book by D.N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), was banned by the Hindutva right wing government because it contradicts BJP belief systems

⁵² Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 133.

⁵³ Manu is responsible for the manusmriti, an important text on Hindu law, composed in the second century BCE. Knott, *Hinduism*, 17.

⁵⁴ Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 133.

⁵⁵ Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 133.

Cows and Water

Cows are not only likened to gods and goddesses in the Vedas and the Puranas, legends of semi-divine cows abound in Indian folklore where cows are instrumental in discovering waterways and uncovering hiding places of the gods. *Sthala puranas*,⁵⁶ temple legends or myths, and folk narratives originating from the *Mahatmyas*, verse texts “that praise a holy place of time,” abound in India.⁵⁷ They involve the inscription of the landscape with the divine *lila*, play, of the gods. Physical features in the land not only remind Hindus of divine omnipresence, they also hark back to a mythological age when gods roamed the earth and left behind markers of their presence. “Hinduism is an imaginative, an ‘image-making’ religious tradition in which the sacred is seen as present in the visible world. . .” and the cow, featuring in a number of origin myths which inscribe her presence within the landscape, forms an important visual component of India’s sacred geography.⁵⁸ Not only does she exist in the landscape as a roaming and grazing animal who contributes to the gradual transformation of the earth with her movements and her deposits, often the terrain itself is inscribed with her memory.

Several rivers and springs are recognized as commemorative traces of cow by-products. The *Mahatmyas* identify the Payosni river as cow’s milk, the Carmavati as cow’s blood, the Yamuna as cow dung, the Narmada River as cow’s urine, and selected hillocks and clefts are called gomukas because they resemble cow’s muzzles.⁵⁹ The cow has thus become enshrined in India’s sacred landscape as a creatrix through instigating the emergence of streams, wells, temples or shrines. In these mini-origin myths, cows alert humans to unknown sources of water or to hiding places of the gods by displaying atypical conduct. In the *Sthala puranas* are descriptions of how cows hitting the ground with their horns discover wells, how milk flowing from their udder transforms into streams of water, or how their sacrifice results in a surge of water.⁶⁰ The origin myth of the Godavari River (*go*, cow and *da*, give), a tributary of the Ganges, involves a cow

⁵⁶ Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *The Self-milking Cow and the Bleeding Lingam* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1987), XVI.

⁵⁷ Anne Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood* (Oxford, UP: 1995), 46.

⁵⁸ Diana Eck, *Darsan. Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 10.

⁵⁹ *Mahatmya texts* are verse texts that praise a holy place or time, either in Sanskrit or in the local language within which the legends take place. Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood*, 6 & 47.

⁶⁰ Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *The Self-milking Cow and the Bleeding Lingam*, 123, 176.

sacrifice.⁶¹ Here a bovine statue gracing the head of the waterway commemorates the cow's involvement in the creation of the river. The sources of many rivers in India flow through the images of cow's mouths. Some of these are natural features and are part of India's sacred landscape; others are sculpted figures commemorating cows (figure 9). In the Himalayas at Utrakasi, water falls from a naturally formed *gomukha* (cow's muzzle) onto a *lingam*, constantly anointing it with *abhiseka*.⁶²

Temples, Self-milking Cows and Milk Miracles

Cow and cow by-products are not only responsible for being the source of rivers, legends of self-milking cows also contribute to the erection of shrines and temples. Ferro-Luzzi describes how in the prototypical Tamil *Sthala Purana*, the cow is observed spontaneously lactating, or performing *abhisheka* over an anthill; upon removing the anthill a *lingam* is discovered and the local ruler decides to build a temple on the spot.⁶³ This type of myth is repeated with variations throughout India, and whether in Vaishnava, Shaiva or even Jaina context, the stone deities are typically revealed by the cows to members of the *gwala*, pastoral castes.⁶⁴

In many instances the cow performs *puja* (worship) by lactating over a place in the ground and in so doing reveals the presence of a god. Most often physical evidence for the god's existence is uncovered in the place where the cow has spontaneously shed milk, but other legends speak of humans finding hiding places of the gods by accidentally spilling milk. The substance is seen as endowed with such potency, that it can act on its own to reveal a god's dwelling place.⁶⁵ Further accounts recall how cows just standing in one place without lactating may indicate where images of the god are hidden.⁶⁶ On other

⁶¹ Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood*, 46.

⁶² Abisheka refers to the bathing or anointing of a deity, or a place with a liquid, usually consisting of milk, oil, ghee or fragrant water

⁶³ Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi. *The Self-milking Cow*, 5.

⁶⁴ Charlotte Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996), 103. The *gwalas* would be a sub-caste of the *sudra*, one of the four main castes designated in India. In folk legends these occupational groups assume an important intermediary role, perhaps as a way to claim greater centrality socially, than they were given by other important classes in the social hierarchy. Some deities seem to be symbols that 'serve' the royal class; some 'serve' men; some, like this, 'serve' another class, who must derive some satisfaction from doing the work Krishna himself did as a boy and youth.

⁶⁵ Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi. *The Self-milking Cow*, 7.

⁶⁶ Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi. *The Self-milking Cow*, 7.

occasions the mere potency of the cow shed suffices in revealing the presence of a deity. The many stories describe how the creative force of the cow and her milk seem to transcend ordinary realms of knowing. Ferro-Luzzi notes that the cow

has the supernatural wisdom to recognize the presence of the god, where human beings are unable to do so, and . . . is the epitome of the [good and righteous] devotee. [I]n a perfect spirit of bhakti⁶⁷ she regularly worships her favorite deity with the rite of abhiseka, sometimes at considerable risk to her own life.⁶⁸

The cow is portrayed as a role model for the ideal devotee: she is of undemanding and humble nature, she provides food and sacrifices for the gods, and she is acutely and intuitively in touch with the gods.⁶⁹ Cows are not only themselves imbued with magical qualities, they are perceived as intermediaries between the physical realm and that of the gods, and as agents providing substances such as milk which allow direct access to the gods. The unusual behaviour of these divinely connected cows results in the erection of numerous shrines and temples devoted most often to Shiva or Vishnu.

Even if specific signs in the form of stone deities or self-lactating cows had not been given, when a temple site is selected, ritual protocol calls for cattle, and specifically cows, to graze extensively at the site to ensure that the location is infused with the sacred presence of the holy mother / father / earth / cosmic cow, who blesses the ground with her hoofs and enriches the soil with her offerings, be they drops of precious milk, foamy saliva, dung or urine. In building a temple, which is seen by Hindus as the “condensed” embodiment of the cosmos, stringent rules are followed to ensure the locale’s utmost purity and sanctity.⁷⁰ The site has to be level and firm, and increased firmness is further insured by invoking the goddesses of stability associated with the earth.⁷¹ However, long

⁶⁷ Bhakti: devotional worship arising from the spirit of love

⁶⁸ Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *The Self-milking Cow*, 105.

⁶⁹ The cow’s potency also transcends religions. Some milk legends in India are associated with Christians and the Virgin Mary, most notably the Virgin of Valankanni from Tamil Nadu. Her edifice was erected to mark where a poor woman asked a shepherd for milk and upon receiving a full pot she never again ran out. Some milk legends have established themselves in Muslim lore; one of them includes the story of a man who offered Mohammed milk in the other world. Others feature Jains conducting abhisheka with milk on their beloved deities. In addition, cows, by merely laying down and letting their milk flow, inspired the Kota, Toda and Karumba tribes to found their villages in their respective places (Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi. *The Self-milking Cow*, 7- 21).

⁷⁰ Eck, *Darsan*. 60.

⁷¹ “Before she was fixed, mother earth was spoken of as the forever wandering,” Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, (2 vols. 1946 reprint, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), 12. King Prthu “attacked Prthivi, the earth, with his bow in order to level her” for she was full of mountains and inaccessible places, but Prthivi shape-shifted into a cow and ran away. She sought refuge with Brahma and consented to creating level places on earth for crops and towns, the preferred locations for building a temple.

before building commences, the *genii loci*, local spirits, inhabiting the area are asked to leave.⁷² Offerings are presented to the *yakshas* (nature spirits) spirits, gods and demons as they are bid to leave and seek accommodation elsewhere. This assures that the site can be dedicated to the new god or goddess in whose name the temple will be erected. After the *yakshas* have left, the soil is analyzed for color, water holding capacity, smell and taste to ascertain its purity.

To further increase the soil's sanctity, additional purification rites are conducted which involve tilling and planting the ground as well as bringing in cows. The earth is ploughed repeatedly and seeded with crops, but not before the seeds and the plough have been consecrated through offerings and rituals performed on specific days. The seeds sown on site are symbolic of the *garbha*, the seed or germ of the temple.⁷³ Planting the seeds is the final gift to the spirits who once inhabited the site, but it is also a first offering to the new divinities. Cows called in to graze on temple ground and sacred crops contribute to its leveling and sanctity. Their essence is transmitted into the soil through the purifying foam of the cow's mouth. Milk dripped from udders and mouths of calves washes the site clean and "homage is paid to it by their breath."⁷⁴ Last but not least, the soil is "purified with sacred water. . . smeared with cow dung. . . decorated with hoof prints and . . . scented with bovine odour."⁷⁵ After the cow's contributions the earth is again ploughed. Before laying out the *Vastupurusa-mandala*⁷⁶ care is taken to ensure that the site is as level as a mirror and perfectly square. Now the earth has yielded, the locale is sanctified through ritual and the presence of cows, and the work of laying out the image of the cosmos may begin.

⁷² Eck, *Darsan*, 59.

⁷³ The Garbhagha is the temple's womb chamber. Eck notes that "in this room, as the temple is being constructed, a rite called garbhadhana, the implanting of the seed, takes place. In the middle of the night, the priest plants the seed of the temple in the form of a small casket which is set into the foundation. It is this seed which symbolically germinates and grows directly upward, through the vertical shaft of the temple to the sky" (Eck, *Darshan*, 63).

⁷⁴ Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 16.

⁷⁵ Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple*, 16.

⁷⁶ The vastupurusamandala is the outline of the cosmic man, the universal life force, the principle of all things within a sacred diagram (*mandala*) (Eck 60). Kramrisch, writing on the vastupurusha notes: "Purusa is the Universal Essence, the Principle of all things, the Prime Person whence all originates. Vastu is the site; in it vastu, bodily existence, abides; from it vastu derives its name. In bodily existence, purusa, the Essence becomes the form," 6-7.

Cow By-products and Pancagavya

Besides temple building, cow by-products are also employed in other ceremonies. *Pancagavya*, or *Pancakatyam*, (panca = five) the five products from the cow (milk, ghee, curd, urine and dung) is considered to have potent purifying properties. In fact the Indian law maker Manu, in *Manusmriti* states that cow-dung is one of the purifiers to be used by Brahmins when they have been contaminated, and he lists “fire, holy food, earth, restraint of the internal organs, water, smearing with cow dung, the wind, sacred rites, the sun and time . . . [as being] the purifiers of corporeal beings.”⁷⁷

Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, a Brahmin scholar, reveals one of the rituals in which *Pancakatyam* is consumed. “When you are inducted into Brahminism,” she explains, that is, when young boys are initiated into becoming Brahmin scholars to study the Vedas and the scriptures, they partake of *Pancakatyam* in their initiation rite. This is given as a *prasad*, blessed or sacred food, and it contains “five things from the cow – a little bit of urine, a little bit of dung, a little bit of milk, a little bit of curd, a little bit of ghee. All these five things are mixed together.”⁷⁸ The ingredients combined are seen as containing beneficial medicinal properties.⁷⁹ This vital transition into Brahminhood, when traditionally the young boy entered *brahmacarya* (the student stage), went away to live with a *guru* then returned to get married and begin his next stage of life *grihasta* (householder stage), is marked by imbibing a mixture of these five ingredients from the cow, and Krishnamurthy notes that “whether he is aware of it or not . . . [partaking of] it is a must.”⁸⁰

Pancakatyam is also referred to as *Pancagavya*.⁸¹ Its preparation is not revealed in the oldest Vedic texts, but it is mentioned in the *Baudhayana-Grhya-Sesasutra*.⁸²

⁷⁷ Manu 5: 105, cited from *Annayya's Anthropology*, by A. K Ramanujan (A.K. Ramanujan taught in the University of Chicago's South Asian Studies department for many years) <http://www.indiastar.com/hegde1.html> (20 Feb 2004). The *manusmriti*, a text on Hindu law, was composed in the second century BCE. Knott, *Hinduism*, 17.

⁷⁸ Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: 8th May 2002. Krishnamurthy is not only a Brahmin scholar, but a gifted artist as well.

⁷⁹ Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: 8th May 2002.

⁸⁰ Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: 8th May 2002.

⁸¹ Dubois refers to it as *pancha-gavia* (153).

⁸² J. Gonda, *Vedic Ritual. The Non-Solemn Rites* (Leiden – Köln: E. J.Brill, 1980), 185. These are described as the codes of domestic ritual by the French Institute of Pondicherry which is investigating “Brahmin

Manu describes *Pancagavya* as a mixture useful for purification and expiation, and Jha notes that “the commentaries and religious digests, most of which belong to the mediaeval period, abound in references to the purificatory role of the *pancagavya*.”⁸³ Gonda even points out that treatises call for the five products to be obtained from five cows of different colour.⁸⁴

According to A. K. Ramanujan, *Pancakatyam* was administered to a Brahmin upon his death: “When a Brahmin is nearing his death,” his feet are turned to face South which

is the direction of Yama, the God of Death; it is also the direction of the ancestral world. Next, the Vedic chants are uttered in the dying person's ear. And *panchagavya* --a sacred mixture made from cow's milk, curds, ghee, urine and dung--is poured into his mouth. A dead human being is unclean. But the urine and dung of a living cow are purifying.⁸⁵

Pancakatyam is also used as an important component in other ceremonies; in the days of princedoms and royalty it was applied as unction for a king. It had the power to transfer the sacrificial material and the mantras into him.⁸⁶ It also had the reputation of ridding the person imbibing it of any sin, even if this sin had been committed knowingly, so it was viewed as a strong ritual purifier.⁸⁷ In ritual invocations *Pancagavya* was addressed as a god.

O god pancha-gavia, vouchsafe to pardon the sins of all the creatures in the world who offer sacrifice to you and drink you, pancha-gavia. You have come proceeding from the body of the cow; therefore I offer you my prayers and sacrifices, in order that I may obtain the remission of my sins and the purification of my body which are accorded to those who drink you. Vouch safe also to absolve us who have offered you puja from all the sins that we have committed either inadvertently or deliberately. Forgive us and save us!”⁸⁸

Pancagavya may be offered to a woman who has delivered a child. After the delivery the mother is traditionally kept secluded. She is not allowed to touch anything of importance to the household. On the eleventh day after the birth she is “bathed and offered *panchagavya* consisting of cow's urine, *tulsi* leaves, [sacred basil plant, *Ocimum*

Authority and Patronage in Ancient India: Creation of a Trans-Regional Elite Culture,” under the team of Dr. Timothy Lubin (<http://www.ifpindia.org/brahmin.html> (29 March 04)

⁸³ Jha, *Myth of the Holy Cow*, 145.

⁸⁴ Gonda, *Vedic Ritual*, 47.

⁸⁵ A. K Ramanujan, *Annayya's Anthropology*, <http://www.indiastar.com/hegde1.html> (20 Feb 2004).

⁸⁶ Gonda, *Vedic Ritual*, 188.

⁸⁷ Abbé I.A Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Trans. Henry K. Beauchamp. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1983, 195. (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1906)

⁸⁸ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 153.

sanctum] cow-dung etc.”⁸⁹ Water infused with *tulsi* is sprinkled around the room to further the purification process and the new mother is given specially prepared foods. This is just one of several rituals involving the birth of the child.

Panchagavya is also administered if a person (most notably a Brahmin) is thought to have inadvertently become polluted through contact with people engaged in impure actions, or from another caste, for it will restore the imbiber to his or her former unpolluted status due to its potency as a ritual cleanser.⁹⁰ Whether anointed upon a king, directly deposited on site to procure increased sanctity for the locale, imbibed by a young Brahmin boy to mark his next stage in life, by a new mother, or administered to the dyig to ensure blessing on the release and journey of the soul, the cow’s by-products were clearly perceived as providing a direct link to all aspects of sacredness and as having highly significant transformational powers.

Vibhuti

Cow by-products are also used to anoint holy men, specifically the followers of Shiva. “The Shaivite’s white caste mark on the forehead is ash made from ritually burning a ball of dry cow-dung.”⁹¹ *Vibhuti*, holy ash, is prized as a most sacred substance. It is obtained by burning dung, milk and ghee from a cow, along with other precious substances such as honey. Igniting these ingredients seemingly produces a clean, white ash, unlike that produced by setting other materials ablaze.

Everything given by the Divine Mother, in her form as Kamadenu, the milk cow, is considered as God’s grace and blessing. *Vibhuti* has a special, godly cleansing force. When we put *vibhuti* on our foreheads it has the power to make the blood circulate correctly.⁹²

⁸⁹ <http://www.webindia123.com/goa/people/sacraments.htm> (13 May 2002)

⁹⁰ U. R. Anathamurthy, *Ghatashradda*, Translated from Kannada by Narayan Hegde. In this short story the narrator, a Brahmin boy from Karnataka, who after his initiation ceremony was sent away from home to learn the Vedas, found accommodation, along with other boys, with Yamunaka, a young widow. She had an affair and subsequently got pregnant, underwent a botched abortion and died. When the young scholar returned home to his parents, “they made me wear a new janivara and swallow panchagavya to ritually cleanse me of the pollution my contact with Yamunakka had brought me.”

http://www.kannadasaahithya.com/english/shortstories/ura_ghatashradda.htm (4 Feb 2004).

⁹¹ Apinan Poshyananda, “Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition.” *Traditions / Tensions Contemporary Art in Asia* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996), 48.

⁹² http://www.sripremananda.org/English_Home/Mahashivarathri/vibhutiEng.html (15 Jan. 2003)
God in this sense would be referring to Shiva.

Consecrated *vibhuti*, applied to various parts of the body, is said to not only benefit the body physically, to cure diseases and to relieve mental anguish, but also to remind the spiritual aspirant of the transitory nature of life.⁹³ The ashes represent the final stage of all material matter, the eventual decay of the human form. Applied by the Shaivites in three horizontal stripes across their foreheads, they also represent the three realms which bind the soul to the body and which hinder it from becoming enlightened; *anava*, ignorance, obscures the divine light, *karma*, the sum of actions causes the soul to reincarnate, and *maya*, illusion, keeps the soul bound to, and captivated by creation. The word *vibhuti* implies resplendence, power, glory, wealth and highest purity.⁹⁴

When artist Sheela Gowda juxtaposes gold leaf with cow-dung to create luminously streaked plaques, she is working with materials that for a western or international audience are conceived of as being on the opposite ends of the scale. It appears that she is contrasting a precious, valuable matter with a filthy waste-product, but as demonstrated above, in India gold painted on dung may not only recall the idea of sacred geography, as embedded within the *shtala puranas*, it may also serve as a reminder of how cow-dung in itself is a substance capable of emitting divine qualities and of being exalted to such a degree that men from the highest caste partake in *Pancakatyam* during a significant initiation ceremony, and holy men anoint themselves with *vibhuti*. In these cases, dung has assumed a rank higher than gold. Viewed in this light, these materials combined in Gowda's art work may be read as standing no longer in juxtaposition to each other, but rather on equal footing.⁹⁵

Goshtas, Goshalas and Gopuja

Today the cow-sanctified temples often have *goshalas* (cow shelters) or

⁹³ According to another source, *Vibhuti* "is created by burning cow dung along with milk, ghee, honey, etc. It is a principle sacrament in the worship of Lord Siva, representing His burning away of our ignorance to ashes. The cow dung is obtained from cows fed sixteen varieties of medicinal leaves. The dung of these cows is collected after allowing sufficient time for digestion. The collected dung would then be formed into flat cakes and dried in the sun. . . The *vibhuti* we apply indicates that we should burn false identification with body and become free of the limitations of birth and death. . . *Vibhuti* has medicinal properties and is used in many ayurvedic medicines. It absorbs excess moisture from the body and prevents colds and headaches." <http://www ghen.net/hindufaq/cache/28.html> (15 January 2003)

⁹⁴ http://www.sripremananda.org/English_Home/Mahashivarathri/vibhutiEng.html (15 January 2003)

⁹⁵ This work will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

pinjrapoles (animal shelters) attached to them, not only to impart the site with an increased aura of sanctity but also because the cow and her products are used extensively in temple ritual. Temple *goshalas* fulfill both a vital practical as well as a spiritual function, and the idea of the *goshala* may have its roots in Vedic India as a *Goshta*, which is literally translated as a “standing place for cows.”⁹⁶ This term not only refers to shelters, but to the cattle grazing pastures themselves. Before going to the *goshtas*, the animals were blessed and these spaces were regarded as “very holy place[s] where health, wealth and nourishment dwell.”⁹⁷ Later texts provide evidence of cow shelters existing in the middle ages; one inscription from 883-4 CE mentions the gift of a *gosasa*, and another recognizes cows donated as gifts to *gosalas* by a Cola king in the twelfth century.⁹⁸ An early link pointing to the association of the *gosala* with the temple occurs in 1374-5 with an inscription describing the construction of a *gosala* within the temple precincts of Padmananbhasvamin temple at Thiruvananthapuram.⁹⁹

Some Goshalas run by merchants or the business class are known as *Vania Goshalas*. They are exclusively devoted to the infirm cow for she is regarded as “*Gai hamari mata hai!* The cow is our Mother.”¹⁰⁰ As such she needs to be protected and looked after once her useful life is over. “As soon as Europeans [will] contemplate killing their grandfathers and grandmothers who [are] no longer fit for work, [we will] consider the possibility of shortening the life of the cow, which [has] nourished [us],” said a farmer tending to unproductive cows in response to an incredulous query by an outsider.¹⁰¹ According to his worldview and that of many Hindus, this reasoning is valid; it is when the cow becomes politicized, as addressed in chapter five, that some people appear to value the cow’s life over that of their fellow human beings, and an imbalance arises in what is known as the *ahimsa* philosophy.¹⁰²

As institutions, *Vania Gosahlas* afford devotees the opportunity to practice

⁹⁶ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 54.

⁹⁷ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 54.

⁹⁸ Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 115

⁹⁹ Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, 115.

¹⁰⁰ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 24. (Buffalos, considered unclean animals, are not accepted, even though they too provide milk)

¹⁰¹ Tadeusz Margul, “Present Day Worship of the Cow in India,” (*Numen*. 15, 1968) 75.

¹⁰² According to Lodrick, *ahimsa* is the philosophy of nonviolence to living creatures common to the Jain, Buddhist and Hindu religions Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 267.

gorakshan (cow protection) and *goseva* (service to the cow). They are the most widely distributed goshalas today and obviously fulfill a vital spiritual function for the devotee and a practical one for the cow. But there exist also other types of Goshalas, the *gosadan*, a government sponsored foundation for old cows, the court *goshalas* which were attached to the palaces of the rajas, and the *Gandhian goshala*.¹⁰³ All of these institutions aim to shelter, protect and provide for the animals housed therein.¹⁰⁴

Most temple Goshalas today house productive cows generating milk and other useful supplies for ceremonies and rituals. The cows in temple goshalas not only allow devotees and priests to obtain milk on site to perform different types of rituals, such as *abisheka*, or the donation of *pancamrit*, a “nectar”¹⁰⁵ made from cow products and “distributed to participants in temple ceremonies,” but also to perform *go-puja*, cow worship.¹⁰⁶

Gopuja is a vital component of Hindu worship. It takes place every morning in the temple. As the doors of the sanctum are opened, the cow and the calf are brought to stand before the deity, facing outward.¹⁰⁷ Sandalwood and *kumkum*, red powder, are applied to her body, the cow is sprinkled with holy water and flowers, and then she is circled three times with *aarathi*, burning camphor. As this ritual is taking place with the cow, it is simultaneously also performed on the deity, the god or goddess inside the sanctum. The priest, thus located between the two, performs the puja to the back of the

¹⁰³ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 23

¹⁰⁴ Gandhian *goshalas* were an integral part of the Gandhian *ashrams* which were set up to promote a simple life of meditation, non-violence, and the attainment of *Moksha*, the ultimate goal, enlightenment or release from *samsara*, the eternal cycle of death and rebirth. Gandhi advocated a lifestyle of simplicity and his ashrams were established to provide disciples with a means to pursue such a life style. Devotees were encouraged to make and wear homespun cotton, *khadi*, to meditate and to disregard traditional caste designations, which allotted certain members of society specific tasks; Gandhi expected participants to engage in all aspects of running a household. Ashrams established in his name adhered to these principles and goshalas were an integral part of a Gandhian ashram. Here milk producing, but also infirm cows were cared for. Gandhi spoke highly of the cow. He stated “the central fact of Hinduism is . . . ‘Cow Protection.’ [It] is the gift of Hinduism to the world; and Hinduism will live as long as there are Hindus to protect the cow. Hindus will be judged not by . . . the correct chanting of mantras . . . not by their most punctilious observance of caste rules, but by their ability to protect the cow.” Margul Tadeusz, quoting M. K. Gandhi: “Hinduism,” *Young India* 6.X.1921 in “Present Day Worship of the Cow in India,” (*Numen*. 15, 1968) 64, and Lodrick, quoting M. K. Gandhi, *How to Serve the Cow* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1954) 3-4, in *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 25.

¹⁰⁵ This nectar is a combination of milk, curds, ghi, sugar and honey. It is often used to anoint the deities (Jha 132).

¹⁰⁶ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: 8th May 2002.

In other words, they present their buttocks to the deity

cow “where Lakshmi is supposed to reside.”¹⁰⁸ This ritual is carried out every day of the year and, in fact, Lakshmi Krishnamurthy notes, from birth to death, the cow and her calf play a vital role in Brahmins’ lives, not only marking vital transitions, but also signifying minor life altering events. Accordingly

when you [have a] house warming, then the cow and the calf are brought in. They are asked to walk . . . into the household first, before the people walk in. For everything we have to have the cow and calf. Even after the death of a person – you are supposed to . . . donate . . . to the priest, a cow and a calf as your finances allow, otherwise a token payment for a cow and a calf. So from birth to death, for every ritual, the cow plays an important role.¹⁰⁹

Besides the use of cows in temple rituals, their by-products may also be a component in *prasada* (offerings to the gods), which are usually obtained by the pilgrim or devotee on site and presented to the gods. Afterwards the blessed food is donated to temple visitors. In addition, *ghi*, butter, is used extensively within the temple as fuel for lights, and as a substance to anoint deities. This medium, like dung, is malleable as well as being fairly solid, and wrapping statues of deities in a cloak of ghee as a way of honouring them results in artistic and creative expressions.¹¹⁰

Krishna, Cow Festivals and Cow-dung Art

To Hindu minds, Krishna and the cow are inseparable. The Goshalas operating in the area where Krishna is said to have lived and played with the *gopis*, (cow girls or milk maids) hold elaborate festivals to mark auspicious occasions associated with the beloved cow-herder’s life.¹¹¹ This area, southeast of Delhi and northwest of Agra located around Mathura and along the Yamuna river is called Braj, or Vraja, and is perceived as *Golak*, cow heaven on earth. Although ahimsa, karma, class, Vedic accounts, origin myths, Lakshmi, Kamadhenu and the Brahmanic mother / father cow idea are strong determinants in protecting cattle and honouring the cow, Krishna, too, is such a popular god of the Hindu pantheon that merely through his association with cows, Hindus would be inclined to respect these gentle bovines.

¹⁰⁸ Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: 8th May 2002.

¹⁰⁹ Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: 8th May 2002.

¹¹⁰ This is the subject of future research.

¹¹¹ Braj is situated near Mathura south of Delhi

Krishna has a huge following. He is “revered by all orthodox Vaishnavas who are usually strict vegetarians and ardent worshippers of the cow.”¹¹² He is a composite divine figure whose various and distinctly different identities present the body of a complex divinity: he is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu; he is the god hero from the *Mahabharata* (a great Hindu epic) who accompanies Arjuna as his advisor and best friend into battle; he is the mischievous divine child who, dark blue like the river, was born as Krsna Narayana from the Yamuna; he is the embodiment of Mount Govardhana, and finally he is fervently desired as the pastoral cowherd who is renowned as a lover extraordinaire.¹¹³ In this role Krishna, who plays with the cows and *gopis* in fields around Vrindavan, is considered *gopa*, the protector of cows, and *govinda* the chief herdsman. These attributes have also been ascribed in Vedic literature to Vishnu when he is conceived as the divine herdsman,¹¹⁴ “among swift running”¹¹⁵ cows, and as Gopa, a youth living amongst horned cows, (R.V. 1, 155.6),¹¹⁶ however, according to Vaudeville, the association of Krishna as cowherd with the god Vishnu is a later development.

The first iconographic evidence of a fusion of these deities may be traced to the sixth century where the pastoral Krishna Gopala is visually connected with the epic Krishna in a rock cut temple in Badami, Karnataka. Here, Vaudeville points out, a melding of their legends takes place, albeit with one important omission; Krsna is not shown in his capacity as musician, playboy, lover and tease. Around the eighth century the devotional songs of the Tamil Alvars combine these two aspects of the god with the veneration of the Krishna child. Southern pastoral castes singing Krishna’s praises and performing at festivals and celebrations, help spread Krishna’s popularity north through their ‘song-lines,’ and later on in the 15th century, the Saint Caitanya significantly contributes to establishing Krishna’s birthplace as Mathura.¹¹⁷

Damodara-Krsna, a cowherd god and the predecessor of Krishna, “belongs to the oldest stratum of Hindu beliefs and . . . his cult has its roots in the religious prehistory of

¹¹² Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 67.

¹¹³ Charlotte Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996), 25 & 28.

¹¹⁴ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 66.

¹¹⁵ Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 33.

¹¹⁶ R. N. Salletore, *Encyclopedia of Indian Culture*. Volume II (E-K) (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1982, repr. 1989), 482.

¹¹⁷ Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 33-4

India.”¹¹⁸ Certain elements in Krishna’s legend point to tension between the brahmanical gods of old, and the popular cult figure. In the *Hari-vamsa* and the *Visnu Purana*, Krsna-Gopal persuades his fellow herders to give up the cult of Indra and follow their own traditions of celebrating cows and hills, for “we are milkmen and we live in forests and hills. Hills, forests and cattle, these are our supreme benefactors.”¹¹⁹ In the *Visnu Purana* Krishna again emphasizes that “cattle and mountains are our gods.”¹²⁰ He encourages the villagers to celebrate this by circumambulating the hill with their cattle, a ritual which is still performed in Goshadans and homes around Braj today. In a battle between the Aryan god Indra and Krsna, the cowherd god succeeds in ousting Indra. His victory over Indra is commemorated with the festival *govardhana-puja* which celebrates Krishna raising Mount Govardhana on the palm of his hand to protect his people from Indra’s wrath which was unleashed upon them by his rain cows, the clouds.

The tension between a beloved folk deity and a brahmanically approved god recalls the dismissal of the popular god Shiva and his phallic emblem by the Vedic brahmins. Just as lingam worship was eventually accepted, Krishna’s legend too was “progressively refined by and assimilated into Vaishnava bhakti” in a process that concluded around the tenth century in southern India.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 44.

¹¹⁹ Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 77.

¹²⁰ Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends* 78.

¹²¹ Vaudeville notes it concluded with the “compilation of the Bhagavata Purana,” a work she describes as “a real krsnaite bible. Vaudeville *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 46.

Hinduism is thought of as a syncretistic fusion of belief systems which is most visible in the ten incarnations of Vishnu; in one such incarnation the avatar returns to earth as Buddha. This accommodation and adjustment toward various beliefs seems to have a long history in India. In the Indus valley numerous artifacts unearthed indicate that ancient folk traditions and customs of the indigenous culture played a vital role in influencing Aryan ideology. The abundance of female figures and phallic symbols recovered point to an ideology distinctively different from that espoused by the Aryans as written down in the Vedas, and it seems that a syncretistic fusion of various elements gave rise to the fluid Hindu tradition in its various aspects and forms which today continues to evolve and change. The idea of the divine cow mother probably emerged from the popular cults of the common, rural, agriculturally based people. This seems to have been an idea common to many pastoral societies and not restricted to India. The populace’s active worship most likely resulted in the addenda to the great Vedic texts in the form of the puranas, which are filled with stories about Shiva, Krishna, the goddesses and the cow. An example of this may be seen in the Kalika Purana. David R. Kinsley, *Hinduism* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, inc., 1982) 116.

Doniger O’Flaherty discusses what she calls the “shifting balance of power in Indian hierogamies.” She points out how male dominance is challenged and reversed in Tantric myths and how the idea of the divine feminine, only barely hinted at in the Vedas, starts to flourish and even dominate in the Puranas. Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes and Other*, 77.

In ancient times Krishna was the mighty *Yaksha* (nature deity) of Mount Goverdhana and a subordinate deity to the great *naga* (snake) Balarama. There are references in Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* and in the Pali Buddhist canon that these two deities were worshipped together in pre-Buddhist times.¹²² "Krsna-Gopala belongs to a well known series of pre-Aryan earth divinities"¹²³ such as Pasupata-Rudra, and the plough-holding god, who is known under a variety of names such as Sankarsana or Balarama. Krishna emerged as a tellurian deity from nature worshipping practices.¹²⁴ Today he is known and loved for his butter stealing pranks as a child. In his youth and early manhood, he is associated with a woman, his beloved Radha, but he is also ever attentive to the 'gopis,' the cow-herding women, all of whom adore him. These stories illustrate how the divine power is simultaneously lover to all and lover of each individual. And one of the many ways in which Krishna is celebrated, in ceremonies enacted by Brahmin priests and women alike, is through creating his likeness with cow-dung.

The Goshalas established in the area of Braj, where Krishna played with the gopis, hold a number of festivals to mark specific events associated with mythological accounts of the god. One of them is *Annkut*, or *Goverdhan Puja*, celebrated at the Nathdwara temple Goshala. This commemorates Krishna's raising of the mountain Goverdhan Pahar on his little finger. This well known legend of Krsna lore has been depicted in Indian art (painted in manuscripts, murals and on cloth, and sculpted in

It appears that the learned Brahmin clergy in this way recuperated the folk memory of the female as divine, and both in the past and today cows not only played an integral role, they are indeed central to Brahmin ritual.

The same obviously applies to Krishna who was gradually embraced by orthodoxy.

¹²² Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 27.

¹²³ Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 45.

¹²⁴ The cowherd god is said to have been born in the rainy season from the Yamuna River with a bluish black complexion and set down on the banks by a naga. Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 28. This origin myth would support a theory put forth by Clark Heinrich that the blue god Krishna is in fact a mushroom which grows in cow patties in the shade of trees, in slightly cooler climates (on mountains and hills) needs water (nagas) to grow, emerges after rains (Indra's blessing) and is, due to its psilocybin content, blue. This would explain Krishna's longstanding affiliation with cows as well. Krishna announcing that he is the mountain would also make sense if the god is thought of as mycelium surviving and spreading underground and producing mushrooms when conditions are right. Krishna, so often depicted holding up the mountain like an umbrella, also teasingly suggests the mountain is an umbrella-like mushroom top. Krishna as a psychedelic mushroom would seduce the gopis with his magic and could also be seen to make love to many gopis at a time, as the legends tell, if he were something that is imbibed or eaten. Clark Heinrich, *Magic Mushrooms in Religion and Alchemy* (Rochester, Vermont: Park Street Press, 2002), 35. Psychedelic substances are also known as entheogens, a word whose etymology means generating the god within. Benny Shanon, *The Antipodes of the Mind* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 29.

bronze, stone and wood) innumerable times. But to celebrate Krishna's feat on this occasion, the Nathdwara priests create a relief on the ground of the cattle lord, showing him victoriously lifting the mountain, out of cow-dung (*gobar*). The image is "decorated with rice, colored powder, turmeric and flour"¹²⁵ (figures 11 and 12). After sculpting the relief, Krishna is invited to inhabit his likeness. The cow-dung image is now imbued with such sanctity, it must not be destroyed by humans. This job can only be performed by a being considered more sacred than Brahmin priests: a herd of cows whose horns are adorned with peacock feathers, a symbol of Krishna, are brought in to, with their hooves, put an end to the sculpted shape that has served its ritual purpose.

Cow-dung art is also created at the Vrindavan Goshala. Even though the material used may, according to western academic standards, be considered a filthy and unsuitable sculpting medium, in this context the cow-dung is regarded as the highest, most sacred, and certainly most appropriate substance available with which to create a reproduction and a body for Krishna. Although the artwork is ephemeral and again would not even be considered art according to western-based criteria, this art created in ritual and subsequently inhabited by the lord himself, resonates with such power, it may not be touched. As such it assumes similar status to artwork hidden behind glass in an art gallery or confined to a museum in the west.¹²⁶

Goverdhan Puja celebrated at the Vrindavan Goshala also involves the fashioning and decorating of a horizontal image of Krsna made from cow-dung; again, he is depicted in a casual stance, lifting up the mountain. Here a protective rectangular frame of dung surrounds the entire image, (figures 11 and 12). The officiating Brahmin priests carry out invocations to Krishna and then perform *puja* (worship) to his dung image and to a little calf waiting nearby. Accompanied by the chanting of mantras, milk oblations are poured onto a stone that has been placed in Krishna's navel. Then ghee lanterns are lit and placed on his body and finally the "priests perform *parikrama*," the circumambulating of the image as a symbolic reference to the circumambulation of Mount Govardhana near

¹²⁵ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 118.

¹²⁶ Sculptures in Indian museums seem to be considered as much alive as if they were housed in temples or homes where they are constantly being handled, i.e. washed, dressed, adorned and worshipped; as such, people do not hesitate to touch them.

Mathura.¹²⁷ Devotees place offerings of flowers, food, and money on Krishna's *gobar* body. When these rituals are completed, the calf is encouraged to walk into the sacred dung which is now "god incarnate," and it would be blasphemous if a human were to engage in its destruction.¹²⁸ Once the cow has walked through the image, Krishna is no longer present and the dung may easily be scooped up and disposed of.

Whereas Goverdhan Puja is more of a regional festival, commemorated if there is a strong Vaishnava influence at the local institutions, Gopastami is celebrated in *goshalas* throughout the country and it is even observed in some pinjrapoles. The *Gopastami* festival is also known as *Gocharan*, the grazing of the cows, which commemorates the first time when the boy Krishna took his step-father's cows out to graze. In a *vania* *goshala* in Vrindavan, *Gopastami* is celebrated by selecting about one hundred of the institution's best cattle. In preparation for the festival they are washed; their horns are painted silver and their bodies are decorated with orange dabs of paint and handprints. Thus adorned, the cows are led by Krsna and his brother Balarama, two young boys dressed up for the occasion, on a procession down the streets where they are followed by cowherds and drummers, pilgrims and devotees. The procession winds its way into the city center bringing daily activities to a standstill. People watching offer the animals food and kneel in the dust, foreheads to the ground, as the herd passes by. Some spectators even smear cow-dung on their foreheads in a sign of respect to the gods who dwell within the cow.¹²⁹ As the sacred animal walks by, she is believed to have blessed even the dust. After the procession returns to the *Goshala*, *Gopuja* is performed by a guest of honour. He sprinkles a selected cow with holy water, places garlands around her neck, and paints a red dot (a *tikka*) on her forehead. After honoring her in this way, he and fellow worshippers, circumambulate the cow several times, touch her forehead, and in turn lift up her tail bringing its tip to their foreheads, and finally complete the ritual by sliding under her belly. The festival concludes in the evening when hundreds join to celebrate. They bring delicacies to feed the cattle and perform their own *gopuja*. Sticks of burning incense are placed in the random piles of cow-dung that lie "scattered over the courtyard," but the highlight of the evening is the performance of the Krishna lila

¹²⁷ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 122.

¹²⁸ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 122.

¹²⁹ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 114.

commemorating Krishna's life.¹³⁰

Festival times offer people the occasion to visit Goshalas and honour the cow. *Sakti Puja* takes place in Bengal, a day after Gopastami. It is specifically held to celebrate and honour the female principle "in the form of the cow mother."¹³¹ Another cow festival celebrated throughout India is *Goshhastami* in the month of Karttika. Goshalas receive numerous visitors on this auspicious day in November which "is a special day set aside for the cow."¹³² Festivals such as Holi or Diwali are also reasons to visit a goshala, make donations and receive *darsan* (the auspicious sight of a deity, seeing and hopefully also being seen by it) from the cow.

The cow, as demonstrated above, is afforded a central place in the Hindu tradition. She is associated with the mother/father idea of Brahma, with the popular deities Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna and Radha, as well as with Lakshmi and Kamadhenu. The cow features in *Sthala puranas* and in folk narratives originating from the *Mahatmyas*, and she is invested with varying degrees of sanctity. According to the mythology surrounding the cow, she has the supernatural ability to discover waterways, gods, *lingams* and sacred places, and her presence imbues greater sanctity to already holy sites. Some consider her to be the most auspicious living being to behold upon awakening, and both she and her by-products, believed to be inscribed with magico-religious powers, are used extensively in ritual - from daubing holy ash and fashioning deities, to imbibing *pancakatyam* at initiation ceremonies.

When Sheela Gowda picks up cow-dung to fashion it into art, she is selecting a potent substance which resonates with multiple meanings and conveys to many of India's Hindus (who make up the majority of the population), various levels of sanctity, purity and blessing. Gowda then, is not only tapping into ancient ideas around the cow which associate the bovine with female divinity, abundance, fertility and purity; Gowda is also indirectly or directly, consciously and subconsciously, doing something that in many Indian viewer's eyes, could be seen as *either* validating art forms created in contemporary ritual based on ancient practices around cow-dung, or subverting its sacred history and context, use and meaning. By transferring this ephemeral material into an urban high art

¹³⁰ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 114.

¹³¹ Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places*, 161.

¹³² Paul Bowen, ed. *Themes and Issues in Hinduism* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998), 101.

setting and presenting it within a different context, Gowda is creating an encounter between values associated with agricultural culture and ancient ritual, with roots both in rural folk culture and in sacred texts, and modern urban culture, that is middle class to elite, who are educated (often abroad) and exposed to western scientific values including a medical culture which pronounces cow-dung to be inherently, bacteriologically filthy. Gowda's art raises a number of questions. Is she trying to reach across the geographical, lifestyle, class-divide and remind urbanized, modernized Indians of something meaningful they have forgotten? Or is she trying to send the message to the Hindu fundamentalist and Hindu and Muslim rioters that no one can own, dominate or control something that is universally available and part of nature, and that the cow, like nature, feeds all? Through her art, Gowda opens up dialogue, but she is also creating and playing with fundamental, yet poetic juxtapositions and multiple meanings.

The following chapter will expand on these meanings by exploring how women draw on cow-dung for its sacred, purifying qualities to conduct rituals within domestic settings, but they also resort to dung for its practical, malleable and sculptural properties. Chapter three forges an even more direct link to Gowda's work, who picked up cow-dung not only for its many symbolic meanings, but precisely because it is also an indigenous women's medium.

Chapter Three

“From Dung to Divinity”¹

Cow By-Products in Women’s Rituals, Religious and Folk Art Forms

As the previous chapter demonstrates, cow-dung emitted by the sacred cow is a powerful substance and cow by-products are sometimes conceived of as being so hallowed and imbued with such potency, they are consumed to purify and wash away sin. In addition, cow-dung is used as a sculpting medium within a religious context to create an image of Krishna that assumes such sanctity it would be defiled by human hands. Yet cow-dung is not consistently thought of as sacred material; if it were, Brahmin men would be scrambling to stand by the cow and catch its next emission. This dirty job, however, is left to women and children of the poorer echelons in society who collect the excrement for fuel. Cow-dung is such a malleable and versatile material manipulated for use in so many different contexts, its meaning resides within the application.

When Gowda applies cow-dung in her art, she is not only drawing attention to the material as a substance which inherently oscillates with ritual and transformative tension because of its symbolic resonance, a tension inherent in the material due to its use by such diverse members of society as the poor, who collect it for fuel, and the elite who imbibe it as *pancagavya*, beyond this Gowda is building upon an ancient tradition of its application as an artistic medium. While we have already encountered art created with cow-dung by men, in this chapter I will discuss the relationship of cow-dung to women and the various ways women put this material to use. This will foreground how I perceive Gowda’s manipulation of the material as a feminist act; not only is she drawing on an indigenous female-centered substance, which, on one level signals her status as an Indian woman artist, her act can also be interpreted as validating women’s traditional art forms and politicizing marginalized women’s social conditions by reconfiguring a substance they use and placing it in public national and international arenas. Doing so, I see her as opening up the issues of women’s work and women’s social conditions for public

¹ A term borrowed from an unpublished essay by Dr. Astri Wright.

discourse. Art historically speaking, Gowda is building on an ancient artistic heritage for cow-dung has been used for centuries as a component in art production, be this in the domestic, ritual, folk, tribal, rural, religious, or “high art” realm.

One of cow-dung’s primary functions in India is a source for fuel and this is also one of the ways the material is directly and consciously spoken to in Gowda’s art work, for she too manipulated it to create fuel pats which were transformed into objects d’art by inscribing them with gold leaf and adding other items to the patties (figures 53-56). Not only is cow-dung’s relevance as an energy source of ecological, sociological and historical significance highlighted; I hope that in discussing this use of the material, and momentarily disregarding its sacred resonances, it will help in describing cow-dung’s malleable and sticky qualities and why it can be applied so successfully as an artistic medium.

In India, cow-dung mixed with straw, chaff or other combustible materials, is used extensively as a fuel, both for domestic and commercial purposes (figures 13, 50-52). In 1999 only 19.39% of India’s surface was left covered in forest,² so cow-dung contributes enormously to the Indian environment by providing a fuel substitute for wood, yet one that with its smoke also negatively affects the air quality. Although resorting to dung for fuel may help preserve forests, the practice of scooping up manure before it has had the opportunity to fertilize fields and paddocks also deprives the land of vitally needed nutritional elements; however, dung is often the only fuel source readily available. Collecting it, either for a living, or to keep family kitchens in supply of fuel, is not an easy task – it is labour-intensive in all cases, and in some contexts, requires walking long distances in proportion to the outcome (figure 14). The patties are produced by women who slap dung between their hands until a flat round chapatti-like cake emerges; these fuel pats are usually between fifteen and twenty centimeters across.

In a rare account, Phoolan Devi, an illiterate, low caste woman who once collected dung, describes what it was like for her as a child working with the manure.³ The following takes place in a field.

² <http://envfor.nic.in/fsi/sfr99/misc/summary.html>. According to this executive summary report this is a slight increase from 1997. In 1980 twenty percent of India’s surface was covered in forest. Dietmar Rothermund, *India*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1982), 88.

³ Phoolan Devi is today known as India’s Bandit Queen.

My mother squatted in front of a cow-pat. She took a handful of the cow dung and with a movement I had watched her make since I was a little girl, kneaded it into a cake that she set along side the row of dung cakes in front of her.⁴

Phoolan and her sister were assigned the job of picking up the dung pats their mother had made a few days ago. It was hard work. In spite of the preliminary drying stage, the “dung stuck like honey to [their] hands.”⁵ They stacked the pats in circles, adding layers upon layer, until Phoolan could no longer reach and her older sister took over (figure 15). “By the end of the day the field was full of mounds of dried dung” stained ochre red like the soil in which they grew crops.⁶ A weary Phoolan and her little sister returned to the village balancing straw baskets filled with dung cakes that would later be used to cook their food and keep them warm in the winter. Once women have transported the cow-pats from the field, or carted them into the cooking area, or kitchen, the fuel has entered a semi sacred domain, an area considered “out of bounds to any but the closest family,” and cow-dung, in the lives of marginalized women, becomes an intrinsic part of another daily ritual, that of cooking food⁷ (figure 16).

Dung in the Kitchen: The Ritual Preparation and Consumption of Food

In many urban and middle class homes, rituals such as the ones I will describe below are dying out. These rituals also vary regionally and would further be influenced by nuances and traditions peculiar to the family practicing them, but to many a fervent Hindu, the preparation of food is considered a sacred duty. In numerous homes all meals cooked are first offered to the gods or goddesses presiding over the household. In fact, because of the Hindu belief system that “embraces the one and the many: a transcendent Absolute God and innumerable Gods and Goddesses,” all tasks performed and all actions carried out are seen to interact with the transcendent and so are considered significant and

⁴ Phoolan Devi, et al. *I, Phoolan Devi* (London: Warner Books, 1996), 4. In 1994 Phoolan Devi’s story was taped, and transcribed; in 1995 the book about her life was read to her. She approved each page with her signature (the only words she knew how to write). Devi, member and then leader of an outlawed dacoit (bandit) band, became an elusive hero (a bandit queen). She spent many years on the run, but was eventually caught and served time in prison. After her release she was elected to parliament, but then in 2000, was tragically gunned down and killed by one seeking revenge.

⁵ Devi, *I, Phoolan Devi*, 4.

⁶ Devi, *I, Phoolan Devi*, 4.

⁷ Stephen Huyler, *Village India* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 19.

meaningful.⁸

Stephen Huyler writes:

For the Hindu, as every aspect of existence has a purpose, human meaning involves a fundamental sense of duty and of conscientious accountability. . . Duty includes an intimate relationship with the sacred [and from the first prayers offered in the morning] through to all the tiny rituals that take place during the day, to the acknowledgement of the divine at night[,] [s]pirituality pervades all existence.⁹

Food, in being prepared for the household deity, is handled with utmost care, for it may be easily polluted with improper thoughts or actions. The tasting of food, so often performed by cooks in other parts of the world, is considered inappropriate, for it would “alter the purity of the offering.”¹⁰ After women cook the meal, it is presented to the household gods in a *puja* ceremony, which takes place around the family shrine, the heart, or center of the Hindu home.¹¹

The morning *puja* around the blessing of food usually involves family members who assemble in the *puja* room where the household deities preside. The sacred *tulsi* or *tulasi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) (basil) plant which is considered to have many medicinal properties and is also perceived of as a manifestation of Lakshmi, grows close to the family home where it is lovingly cared for (figure 17).¹² The Tulsi may have shed a couple of leaves during the night, and after offering a prayer, these are now consumed.¹³ Before the blessing of food takes place, the primary woman of the household bathes the household deities, anoints them with kumkum powder, dresses them in fresh clothes and adorns them with fresh flowers. After the gods have been suitably attired and attended to, the food is held up to them as an offering. The ceremony concludes with *arati*, the ritual

⁸ Stephen Huyler, *Meeting God. Elements of Hindu Devotion* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1999), 42

⁹ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 42.

¹⁰ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 63.

¹¹ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 42.

¹² Dubois noted it could be found outside every Brahmin dwelling; when I was in India I witnessed women caring for their tulsi plant by sweeping around it, sprinkling it with water and creating a kolam in front of it. Abbé Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Trans. Henry K. Beauchamp, (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1906), 651. Dubois was a French missionary who travelled in South India from 1792-1823. Kakar describes him as a “natural ethnographer, with a stance toward his ‘fieldwork’ which would meet the approval of any graduate school of anthropology.” Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence* (New Delhi: Viking, 1995), 24.

¹³ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 71. Here he describes how the family members place the tulasi leaves under their tongue as they perform the morning ceremony.

Dubois states in his book on Hindu manners and customs, that the Tulsi leaf was consumed after a meal to aid digestion, *Hindu Manners*, 650.

use of purifying fire, which may involve the burning of another cow by-product, *ghee*, clarified butter.¹⁴

During this ritual all the elements are utilized to stimulate the senses: the air is scented with incense and flowers, water and fire are used to purify, devotees partake in *darshan*, the act of seeing and being seen by the deities, silence is broken with the ringing of bells, and finally, both touch and taste are engaged in the concluding ritual of consuming a divinely blessed meal, for the food presented to the gods during the *puja* has now been transformed into *prasad*, sacred food, imbued with energies of the deities present.¹⁵ In eating this food with a body and mind attuned to the sacred, devotees are also ingesting “the divine energy of the deity to whom they have prayed.”¹⁶ Cow by-products, the dung-pats used as fuel to cook sacred food, and the ghee lit to represent the radiance of the deity, are an integral part of this daily ritual. When Gowda creates dung pats and adds gold leaf to the shapes, she may be reminding some of the urban gallery viewers of the sacred associations attached to food - rituals which maybe their mothers or grandmothers engaged in; or she may be presenting a social commentary on the value of cow pats as a source of fuel in the lives of so many disadvantaged women.

Kaccha and Cow-dung's Purifying Role in the Domestic Sphere

Dung may be shaped into bricks, and as already discussed in chapter one, this is one of its many uses Sheela Gowda references in her art work, especially when she creates ‘Mortar Line,’ bricks fashioned and gouged with a red incision and placed in the

¹⁴ *Arati* is an important component of Hindu ritual, one carried out either in the temple or in the home. Often cubes of camphor placed in a special dish are lit for this purpose. They produce a cold flame, however, *ghee*, clarified butter, may also be used. During the morning *puja* the purifying flames are circled in clockwise direction around the deities whilst ringing a bell. Now the family opens their hearts to the sacred presence of their chosen god/dess and prays before passing the *arati* dish around and waving their hands through the flames, which are perceived as representing the brilliance of the deity. Dubois noted that the object of *aratti* [sic] was to “counteract the influence of the evil eye”(148). Another way of warding off the evil eye is to create scary masks called *Trishti* (in Tamil). Dubois referred to these as *drishti-dosha* (149). These are hung in front of houses or on a trees. In gardens the *drishti-dosha* may consist of a vessel attached to a pole which will attract the attention of any one with a malicious intent, thus diverting the evil glance away from the vegetables in the garden. Mothers apply black spots to their young children's faces in the belief that in making them less beautiful, the evil eye will not be attracted to them and will forget to look at them).

¹⁵ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 63.

¹⁶ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 63.

gallery (figures 76 –78), or when she builds with the bricks an installation to resemble a village well (figures 79- 82). However, cow-dung employed in domestic architecture by women, is more often mixed with clay and applied as material to the inner and outer walls of homes (figure 18). Houses are regularly resurfaced by women who cannot afford brick or concrete homes by using a mixture of mud and dung “which is kneaded to a sticky consistency.”¹⁷ They apply the *gobar mitti*,¹⁸ mud and dung mixture, with their bare hands (figure 19). This material is not only used to repair and decorate homes, cow-dung is also employed by women in their domestic environments for, what for centuries has been noted as, its higher resonance and purifying properties.

According to Huyler, *kaccha*, absorbent materials such as clay and dirt, must be regularly decontaminated to rid them not only of physical filth and disease, but also of negative thoughts and malignant energies. The home, seen as a retreat, is a “sanctuary of safety from the outside world” and liminal spaces, such as entranceways and windows, are especially vulnerable zones, which require extra protection from unseen forces.¹⁹ These forces are perceived as evil spirits lurking and looking for opportunities to cause harm and disruption to the domestic sphere, and if the woman of the household is not vigilant in observing the hereditary rituals in safe guarding the home, she will expose her family to misfortune. Applying cow-dung mixed with water to floors and walls of the family home protects the family’s living space, as well as the spirits dwelling within its quarters, from “day to day defilements caused by promiscuous goers and comers.”²⁰

In the past, among the upper classes, it was common practice to have homes “rubbed over once a day with cow-dung;” and to not do so would have been considered rude, especially when visitors were expected.²¹ Today’s upper classes of course inhabit dwellings of a more substantial nature, but where dung and mud houses are still common, the cyclical replastering of floors and walls with cow-dung not only affords psychic protection, it also sanitizes and provides physical protection by deterring insects from accumulating and infesting homes. The regular replastering prevents insects from

¹⁷ Huyler, *Village India*, 237

¹⁸ Stephen Huyler, Creating Sacred Spaces. Women’s Wall and Floor Decoration in Indian Homes,” *Mud, Mirror and Thread*, Nora Fisher ed. (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, Pvt. Ltd.,1995),172-192.

¹⁹ Huyler, “Creating Sacred Spaces,” 173.

²⁰ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 154.

²¹ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 154.

building nests within crumbling walls. In addition, Lakshmi Krishnamurthy notes almost wistfully as she sits in the comfort of her urban concrete, brick and marble home in Chennai, dung imparts a fresh scent, and the springy and resilient surface feels nice to walk on.²²

However, in many instances applying a cow-dung wash to shield against malignant energies is not enough. To afford extra protection, women paint decorative designs around windows and doors and in front of the entranceway into their homes. Sometimes whole house fronts are resurfaced and painted with sacred patterns, which not only deter the presence of evil but “encourage the proliferation of good”²³ (figure 20). In India the household deity, conceived of as female, is recognized by many names, but she is most often identified as Lakshmi. The dung-dwelling goddess is not only known as the one who imparts riches, she is also thought of as the goddess of light and good fortune.²⁴ Her presence is invoked “to fill the home with her protective spirit and keep away misfortune.”²⁵ Designs inscribed around or upon vulnerable zones of the home, circumscribing the front threshold where the private domestic sphere makes contact with the outside world, ensure that she will continue to honour the inhabitants with her benevolent presence.

Painted Prayers ²⁶

In Tamil Nadu numerous women rise every morning before dawn to wash down the entranceway to their home with the purifying and sanitizing cow-dung mixture.²⁷ The area is further sanctified by creating a *kolam* using rice flour. On special occasions, however, such as to celebrate festivals, non-edible coloured powders are added to the rice flour designs to create stunning visual invocations to the goddess (figure 21). *Kolams* are protective line drawings designed to not only summon the goddess, but to keep her

²² Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: May 8th 2002.

²³ Huyler, “Creating Sacred Spaces,” 173.

²⁴ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 546.

²⁵ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 66.

²⁶ A term borrowed from Stephen Huyler’s book of the same title: *Painted Prayers*, 1994.

²⁷ This idea of cow-dung having antiseptic properties is not restricted to India. In speaking with a woman from Nova Scotia, Canada, I was informed that farmers there too believe that fresh cow-dung applied to wounds will prevent infection (In conversation with Susie, Victoria, October, 22, 2002).

spellbound.²⁸ They are usually fashioned using ephemeral materials, but in the case of traditional Hindu upper class urban dwellers, such as Lakshmi, more permanent diagrams inscribed with paint, grace the entranceways to their homes (figure 22). These designs are also painted to mark auspicious occasions such as weddings, and for easy and fast execution of miniature rice flour designs, metal devices with holes punched into them are used either commercially, or in wealthier homes to sprinkle instant auspicious patterns to add to the celebratory setting (figures 23-25).

For day-to-day domestic purposes after women cleanse the entranceway to their homes with the cow-dung wash, they trickle rice flour through their fingers to draw patterns in fluid and easy motions. It is not easy to achieve an even flow using flour as a drawing medium.²⁹ As I found out, and much to my consternation, the rice flour squeaks and sticks and seems to drop through your fingers in clumps. Nagarajan, obviously more versed in the practice, describes the sensation of “pouring rice flour through the fingers with an even flow, almost, as if you were pouring ‘dry water’ from the hand.”³⁰ Usually women lay out the pattern for the *kolam* by first forming a grid of dots; then, sprinkling the rice flour they quickly connect the dots to create the magico-religious device (figure 26).

Often these gracefully interwoven line drawings are abstract images resembling net-like webs which function to capture the good and release the negative.³¹ Sometimes they look like beautiful, yet strangely abstracted flowers, but occasionally the subject matter, inspired by an event, is representational and directly corresponds to the goddess, or force who is being summoned or honoured (figure 27). Kramrisch explains: “the magic diagram makes it possible for power to be present. The power of the god is

²⁸ *Kolam* is the Tamil term for the protective decorative designs. These are also known as *mandanas*, Rajasthan, *rangoli*, Karnataka, *osa* in Orissa, *alpona* in Bengal, *aripana* in Bihar, and *apna* in the western Himalayas. Nicolas Barnard and Robyn Beeche, *Arts and Crafts of India*, (London: Conran Octopus Ltd, 1993), 64. Jyotindra Jain in *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*. (New Delhi: Crafts Museum, 1998), notes that “aripana stems from the Sanskrit *alepana* which derives from the root *lip*, meaning ‘to smear,’ and therefore basically refers to ritual smearing of the ground with cow-dung and clay as prescribed in most of the ancient ritual handbooks” (72).

²⁹ An old woman at the living museum of Dakshina Chittra showed me how to run rice flour through my hands to create even lines. It made a squeaky sound and my lumpy line was not at all appealing.

³⁰ Vijaya Nagarajan, “Hosting the Divine. The Kolam in Tamil Nadu,” *Mud, Mirror and Thread*, Nora Fisher, ed. (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, Pvt. Ltd., 1995), 194.

³¹ In a similar yet reverse process to north American dream catchers which are meant to capture the negative dreams before they make it into your head.

invoked and assigned to its enclosure, it is spellbound.”³²

Not only are the women drawing the goddess and her benedictory forces into their magic, they are also creating a beautiful work of ephemeral art with this daily ritual, their painted prayer. Furthermore, the young girls and women are aware that in creating visual invocations with an edible material, rice flour, their ritual activity affects a further dimension: a number of small creatures and insects come to feed on these offerings. This duty of providing for insects and ants is one “prescribed in the ancient texts, the Dharmasastras.”³³

While kolams are created throughout the year, they take on special significance during Margazhi. Pongal or Sankranti held in the month of Margazhi, is one of the most beloved festivals in south India which involves creating special, colourful *kolams* replete with cow-dung balls, as well as paying homage to the cow.³⁴ *Pongal* is a harvest festival which celebrates bringing in the new crop of rice, but it is also a solar festival dedicated to the sun god Surya; it marks the day the sun moves into the sign of Capricorn and celebrates the passing of the winter solstice and of the sun leaving the most inauspicious month of the year, Margazhi, behind. This month symbolizes the sun’s death “as it journeys to the winter solstice.”³⁵

Margazhi is considered so unlucky that *sannyasis*, Hindu ascetics or mendicants, wander from house to house in the morning banging gongs and wailing with warnings to take “every precaution against the evil influences of this unlucky period.”³⁶ Women rise early to create special kolams at the doorstep of their homes and, in addition to invoking beneficiary forces through their rice flour drawings, they place balls of cow-dung decorated with pumpkin flowers in the midst of their designs³⁷ (figures 28-29). Huyler reports that the cow-dung balls placed in the center of the kolam function to avert the evil eye.³⁸ Dubois wrote: “I believe these pellets are supposed to represent

³² Huyler, quoting Dr. Stella Kramrisch in “Creating Sacred Spaces,” 178.

³³ Heather Elgood, *Hinduism and the Religious Arts* (London and New York: Cassell 2000), 210.

³⁴ Pongal / Pongul also known as Sankranti / Sankranti / Maha-sankranti (great). “Sankranti is the name given to the first day of the solar month; . . . to the day on which the sun passes from one sign of the zodiac to the other. It refers here to its entrance into the sign of Capricorn a period which the ancients celebrate as that of the re-birth of this bright luminary.” Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 571.

³⁵ P. V. Jagadisa Ayyar, *South Indian Festivities* (Madras: Higginbothams Limited, 1921), 201.

³⁶ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 572.

³⁷ Ayyar wrote “bearing a citron blossom,” *South Indian Festivities*, 201.

³⁸ Huyler *Painted Prayers*, 184. (Fig. 19).

Vigneshwara, the god of obstacles, whom they seek to appease by offering him a bouquet. But I don't know why it is that the pumpkin flower is chosen in this case."³⁹ Some interpret the lumps of cow-dung holding a flower "as a symbol of fertility and an offering of love to the presiding deity."⁴⁰ The decorated cow-dung balls holding a brilliant golden flower could also be representation of, or evocation to the goddess Sri-Lakshmi.

Vishnu residing on the cosmic waters of Shesha grows a thousand-petaled lotus "of pure gold, radiant as the sun. This is the door or gate, the opening or mouth, of the womb of the universe. It is the first product of the creative principle, gold in token of its incorruptible nature."⁴¹ Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort, "represent[s] his creative energy."⁴² She is the lotus goddess, *padmasambhava*, lotus born, and *karisini*, "the One Possessing Dung." She has two sons: Mud, *kardama*, and Moisture *ciklita*.⁴³ Considering that pongal is a harvest festival, the end of one cycle and the beginning of the next, these balls of dung decorated with golden pumpkin flowers could well represent the dung and lotus goddess Lakshmi "the universal mother of life in her benevolent life-bestowing life increasing aspect," who encourages fertile growth and prosperity. She would be an appropriate deity to honour at this time of harvest and transition, and considering that she not only possesses and dwells in cow-dung, but is also conceived of as a cow and as the lotus goddess, (the lotus is the metaphor of spiritual transformation because it grows out of the mud, to unfold in the light), cow-dung balls illuminated with a golden pumpkin flower crown would be the perfect symbolic vehicle to honour Lakshmi.

Whatever the true purpose of these decorated dung balls, it is clear that powerful magic is taking place. When considering how cow-dung is used by women as a decontaminate, the balls and their flowers are created to either repel evil from entering the house, or to absorb evil influences, and having interacted with evil by either attracting, pacifying, or deflecting, these cow-dung balls, charged with potentially malignant forces, are collected every evening and carefully preserved. At the end of the month the women, accompanied by music, ritually deposit the cow-dung balls far away

³⁹ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 572.

⁴⁰ <http://www.indianvisit.com/ivnew/fairsandfestivals/festivalsofindia/pongal.htm> 19 March 2001.

⁴¹ Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Princeton: UP, 1992), 90.

⁴² Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 100.

⁴³ Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 91.

in a safe place beyond the boundaries of the village.⁴⁴ In a similar, but reverse conceptualization to the way the Krishna cow-dung image became saturated with the highest essence and was charged with divinity, these balls too have assumed such potent qualities they need to be handled with care and disposed of.

However, other customs serving different needs, involve flattening the cow-dung ball after its use each day and drying it as a fuel pat. These dung cakes are then used to cook the pongal.⁴⁵ In this case it would seem the dung has absorbed the beneficial presence spun by the kolam's sacred web and has become even more hallowed. This custom would confirm that cow-dung balls may be representing the highest and most potent form of good, Lakshmi, the goddess who springs forth from the fertile mud and becomes a lotus, the symbol of purity and "the highest form or aspect of earth."⁴⁶

Pongal is a cow festival. On the first day of San cranty old items are burned and young boys watch over bonfires, which are often "kept burning all night,"⁴⁷ houses are cleaned and repainted, new clothes, sweets and delicacies are purchased, and women put flowers in their hair. The *Bhogi-pongul* (pongul of joy)⁴⁸ day is spent exchanging gifts and entertaining visitors. The second day of San cranti is dedicated to the solar god, Surya. *Pongal*, rice boiled in milk with spices and *jaggery*, palm sugar, is cooked using the newly harvested rice. This is prepared for Surya and the *puja* is usually held in the courtyard of the home. Women clean and wash this area with a mixture of cow-dung and water and then, sprinkling rice powder, create a *kolam* in the design of the Sun god. Brahmins may be called upon to make the *puja*⁴⁹ and during this ritual, the pongal is offered to Surya before being consumed by members of each household (figure 30).

The last day of Pongul is dedicated to cattle and women may draw special kolams honouring the cow and her calf to express their gratitude (figure 32). They may also show the cattle their appreciation for contributing to the wealth of the community through ploughing, pulling carts, and providing dung and milk, by washing them and sprinkling them with a mixture of scented water in which saffron, seeds and leaves have been

⁴⁴ Ayyar, *South Indian Festivities*, 201.

⁴⁵ S. Suresh, "Colourful Tradition," *The Hindu*, January 7 2003, <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mp/2003/01/07/stories/2003010700050200.htm>

⁴⁶ Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols*, 91

⁴⁷ <http://www.bawarchi.com/festivals/pongul.html>

⁴⁸ Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 572.

⁴⁹ Elgood, *Hinduism and the Religious Arts*, 211.

added.⁵⁰ Their bodies are decorated with brightly colored designs, their horns painted and they are adorned with flower garlands, strings of coconuts and fruit (figure 31). After the beautification ritual, they are fed special foods, including the pongal which tastes like “sweet hot porridge”⁵¹ (figure 33). Finally, accompanied by music, the cattle are driven out to the fields to graze unsupervised and unrestricted for the rest of the day.

Writing to the Goddess

Unlike in Tamil Nadu, where painting or drawing *kolams* is a daily occurrence and one which assumes different qualities throughout the year, in Karnataka, *rangoli* (the Kannada term for women’s protective decorative designs) are created on Thursdays, the day dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi. Gowda often witnesses women making rangoli in the suburb of Bangalore where she lives. In most areas in India the women drawing these ephemeral diagrams with rice flour think of their visual communications as sacred writing, and not as painting.⁵² Many of them would be classified illiterate women; the rangoli-writing, then, becomes a forum in which they can visually express their prayers, hopes and desires. Many of Gowda’s art works could be interpreted as paying homage to these women’s communications, either in her experimentation with the line as a form, or when the artist emulates their “writing” by sprinkling a suggestive trace of rice flour onto the surface of her dung smeared painting (figure 56).

In Rajasthan women prepare the ground for the *mandana* (the term used in Rajasthan to describe women’s ritual diagrams) with a mud / dung wash (figure 34), but here wheat substitutes for rice as the daily staple, so they crush lime to create a pigment with which to “communicat[e] directly with the gods.”⁵³ The white *mandanas* look dazzling inscribed on the red mud and dung surface underneath a shimmering blue sky. Although in Rajasthan, as in many other parts of India, these prayers are applied less often than in the south of India, they are “written” to commemorate auspicious occasions, to mark puberty, marriage, death and other life-altering events (figure 35).

⁵⁰ Ayyar, *South Indian Festivities*, 202 and Dubois, *Hindu Manners*, 573

⁵¹ Huyler *Painted Prayers*, 172. (Fig. 21).

⁵² Except in Orissa, where painting sacred patterns is called *chita* (painting) in all other parts of India these visual communications are spoken of as writing. Huyler, *Mud Mirror*, 175.

⁵³ Huyler, *Painted Prayers*, 15

Unlike in other parts of India, women in Orissa conceive of their efforts not as writing but as paintings and they speak of their art form as *chita*, painting. They apply the designs intended for the goddess to the walls of their homes and create fresh canvases every week by covering over last week's *chita*, with a mud dung mix (figures 36 & 37). The women use rice paste as a painting medium which is prepared by soaking the grain over night, and then grinding the softened grain mixture between two stones to create a paste (figure 38). The paste, when first applied to the house wall, is translucent, but the paint soon hardens into an opaque white substance, which contrasts beautifully with the dung coloured walls.

Cow-dung as Canvas in Domestic and Religious Settings, Past and Present

Historically, one of the first instances of cow-dung applied in art for practical purposes, for its sticky and remarkably durable properties, is found at the Buddhist rock cut caves of Ajanta where fragments of paintings dating to the first century BCE still survive. At Ajanta, artists covered the caves' stonewalls with a mixture of mud, dung, straw and animal hair.⁵⁴ They then smoothed and evened out the surface before coating it with lime plaster. Pigments were applied to the still damp background and the resulting frescoes were burnished, a technique which not only allows the pigment to penetrate deeper into the background, but also lends to the paintings a lustrous sheen. Today the Ajanta murals depicting Bodhisattvas, rajas, musicians, queens and ladies set among regal settings and preserved on cow-dung plastered walls, still vibrate with strong colour and an "unworldly light."⁵⁵ They lend insight into contemporary architectural spaces and provide us with information on how the Buddhist message was disseminated.

The tradition of painting on dung-coated surfaces is carried on in numerous communities and for various occasions in India and thus Gowda can be seen as not only carrying on with this tradition, but expanding on it and reinterpreting it. For example, tribal people in Alirajpur, Madhya Pradesh hire male painters called *lakhindra* who apply ancient designs, "similar to one[s] seen in the early cave paintings of Bhembetka,"

⁵⁴ Roy C. Craven, *Indian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, rev. 1997), 127.

⁵⁵ Craven, *Indian Art*, 125.

(Madhya Pradesh) to a mud and cow-dung plastered surface and create paintings depicting multiple figures.⁵⁶ These range from variously scaled humans painted in vivid pigment, red, orange, green and blue, to equally colourful horses and cows, camels, lizards, goats, roosters, peacocks and elephants depicted transporting humans or simply accompanying them. These paintings are perceived as magico-religious devices and are not only created in ritual, but are further sanctified through consecration by a priest. Thus the ancestors are manifested through painting them, and their presence is ritually installed to bring well-being and fertility both to the land and its inhabitants.⁵⁷

Madhubani Painting: From Ritual to Secular Art

Like the ritual use of painting by the tribal people of Alirajpur, Madhubani painting practiced in the district of Bihar was also a ritual art form, but one traditionally performed only by women of the Kayasth caste. The geometrical forms and potent symbols were handed down through generations from mother to daughter. Originally painted on mud and dung plastered walls and floors to invoke the blessings of the goddess, or inscribed on bridal chamber walls to endow newly wedded couples with fertility, like the kolams, Madhubani paintings acted as magico-religious diagrams (figure 39). Today this art form has undergone a radical transformation.

These days Madhubani art is produced “by women of all communities:” the Kayasth, Brahmin and Dalit, however, each community draws on its own traditions to express itself through different stylistic conventions.⁵⁸ Madhubani is no longer confined to walls, but has become mobile, penetrating national exhibition spaces as well as international ones. It is a great example of an art form being adopted and reinterpreted by different communities and transcending not only local, caste boundaries, but also those boundaries imposed by western art historians, for Madhubani has made its way into

⁵⁶ Aashi Manohar and Shampa Shah, ed. et al. *Tribal Arts and Crafts of Madhya Pradesh*. (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1996), 99.

⁵⁷ Manohar, and Shah, *Tribal Arts and Crafts of Madhya Pradesh*, 99.

⁵⁸ Pupal Jayakar writing on Bhatti Chitras and the Paintings of Mithila in *The Earth Mother* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), 101.

spaces of 'high art,' that is the urban and international spaces of contemporary art.⁵⁹ The cow, too, has surreptitiously made its way into Madhubani for she is represented both within and through this art form.

For centuries Madhubani women worked quietly at their ritual art, but between 1966-68 drought stricken Bihar suffered a severe economic crisis. Visiting officials were struck by the lively drawings and bright paintings adorning family homes set against the desiccated, dust-covered landscape. Supplying the women with paper, the All India Handloom Board encouraged artists to take their art off dung-covered walls and paint on a marketable surface. In transferring their skills to paper, the women did not abandon orthodox elements of their paintings; they retained their iconographic vocabulary but also expanded on it by expressing their feelings and aspects of their daily lives.

Today three schools in the Madhubani tradition have emerged which are based along caste divisions and the cow manifests in all three of them. The Kayasth tradition is characterized by the use of intricate line drawing and mainly two colours, black and red. It is rooted in the ritual *aripan* and *kohbar-ghar* paintings and in the decoration of vermilion wrappers. *Aripan* are semi-geometrically inspired floor designs; *kohbar-ghar* are elaborate wall paintings painted in wedding chambers, depicting fertility symbols and an array of sacred designs to encourage a fruitful union between a newly wedded couple. An auspicious day to start the work could only begin after it had been determined by a priest. Then after smearing the wall with cow-dung which lends sanctity, and covering it with rice paste to produce a canvas, began the transformation of an ordinary room into a sanctified space painted with abundant life forms bursting with energy: intertwined birds and snakes, lotus plants and bamboo groves, trees, flowers, creepers, bees, fish, parrots and peacocks all intricately depicted.⁶⁰

The Brahmin school is distinguished by the use of filling large areas with bright colour. This may explain the lack of fine line drawing in their work and the difference in the stylistic approach to Madhubani painting by the women from these communities. As Brahmins, these women were familiar with Hindu literature and sacred iconography, therefore their art is primarily composed of images of gods and goddesses and concerned

⁵⁹ As an example a Madhubani exhibition was hosted at the University of Victoria in the Maltwood Museum in July 2003.

⁶⁰ Upendra Thakur, *Madhubani Painting* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, n.d.), 44.

with stories from the great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Their art lacks the detailed abundance of fertility symbols, yet in their art “colour creates the mood, it establishes the pulse and tempo.”⁶¹ The colours were traditionally derived from natural substances; turmeric produced orange and yellow, *Pevdi*, a mineral, provided a bright lemon colour, indigo was the source for blue, vermillion powder ground with mustard seed created a vibrant red, lamp-soot and cow-dung provided black.⁶² The Brahmin interpretation of Madhubani painting has resulted in a stunning array of bold images describing the rich mythological heritage of these women painters.

After paper was introduced to the Madhubani artist community in the 1960s, images produced for sale were mostly painted by women of the upper Hindu castes, however, by the 1980s art produced of a different style by the scheduled castes was recognized as having merit. The artistic tradition of the Dusadh community⁶³ is rooted in designing tattoos, producing narrative clay relief work to decorate their homes, creating stitched and appliquéd quilts, and occasionally painting the walls surrounding their homes with religious or decorative motifs, in particular images of serpent deities and local goddesses.⁶⁴ The Dusadh paint cows and fish, horses and birds represented in flat imaginary spaces filled with flowers, and small creatures, often harking stylistically back to their appliqué tradition. Figure 40 depicts a cow painted in this style by Sanjula Devi. It is interesting that it is from this caste that images of the Hindu’s inviolate cow have emerged.

In this brief survey of Madhubani painting the cow’s presence has manifested itself trichotomously. First of all she is represented through the cow-dung used as a material to provide a sanctified surface upon which to draw. Secondly, the bovid is present in the dung mixed with soot to create a pigment, and thirdly, the cow’s presence

⁶¹ Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 103.

⁶² Jyotindra Jain, “Madhubani painting, collective tradition and individual expression,” *Madhubani Exhibition Catalogue*, Jean Barbier (Reunion Island, 2000), 27. Jain, *Exhibition catalogue*, 22.

⁶³ Dusadh refers to the guards or watchmen, Jain, 57.

⁶⁴ Dusadh Madhubani art falls into two categories; the first, abstracted, stylized and usually devoid of colour, is derived from the ancient tattoo tradition. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images, simplified, repetitive elements, wavy lines and sticks, snails and circles, presented in registers, make up the pictorial vocabulary of this tradition.

The second category of images depict Dusadh mythology as well as flora and fauna surrounding the Madhubani villages; village life generates a third category.

is visually invoked by depicting her image. The Dusadh have chosen to represent her, not as one among many, as she is so often seen in her usual affiliation with Krishna, but as an autonomous creature celebrated as an entity unto herself.

Communicating with the Goddess: Cow by-products in Women's Rituals

Cow-dung as well as ghee, another cow by product, are also sought out when women call upon the goddess for her help in finding a good husband. Because of the way traditional Indian society is structured, many women are dependent upon their husbands for survival, so it is imperative that they find devoted partners who will provide for them and their children, and who will also treat them with love and respect. In south India, women sometimes turn to the brilliant light of burning ghee to invoke the goddess for her help in finding a good husband.

Stephen Huyler documented three south Indian women creating a rice flour *yantra*, a sacred diagram similar to a kolam, on the floor of a south Indian temple in front of a figure of the south Indian goddess Mariamman, in a collaborative effort to attract the goddess's attention.⁶⁵ They first drew a grid of dots and then connected these to form a 1008 petaled lotus. A terracotta lamp with a wick was placed within each petal and as darkness fell, the women poured ghee into each receptacle. Once lit, the *yantra* was transformed into a scintillating light filled prayer. Fire not only represents the brilliance of the deity, it also attracts. Combining the fervor of their prayers and the magic of a *yantra* with the brilliant power of 1008 ghee-fueled lamps, the women created a powerful and dazzling visual invocation to the goddess.⁶⁶ In summoning the goddess within a sacred setting not only verbally, but also visually, they hoped to attract her attention to their prayers (figure 41).

⁶⁵ Huyler, *Meeting God*, 204-7.

⁶⁶ Burning ghee is an integral component in many a Hindu's devotional routine. As well as being used in *arthi*, the circumambulating of the purifying flame around a devotee or a deity, ghee lamps are lit in front of statues, home shrines and even trees to honour the living presence of the deity residing there

Sanjhi

In rural areas of northern India, unmarried girls also design and create sacred diagrams called Sanjhi to attract good husbands, but rather than inscribing them on the floor of a temple, they apply them to the walls of their homes. Using cow-dung as the base material they sculpt either abstract or personified images of the goddess Sanjhi as a way to honour her and invoke her help in finding good husbands. These ritual reliefs are constructed for a period of ten days after the monsoon rains in early October, when women would traditionally have finished replastering their mud homes. The girls use a variety of materials, from cow-dung and mud to a combination of flower petals, leaves, shells, beads, dried pigment, confetti, different coloured pulses, mirrors, gold foil, feathers and stones to fashion depictions of the goddess Sanjhi, who is seen a manifestation of Shakti, or as Durga, Uma or Parvati⁶⁷ (figures 42 & 43).

Sometimes plastic heads are carefully affixed into the dung to goddess Sanjhi with her consort Sanjha. In wearing a peacock-feathered crown, Sanjha has adopted the characteristic emblem of Lord Krishna, the famous cowherd god, which implies Sanjhi would be his beloved Radha. In invoking the presence of this mythical divine couple whose love for each other is legendary, the young girls are hoping the goddess too will bless them with a union as rewarding as this. The girls congregate each evening over a period of ten days in front of the Sanjhi, for now the image of the goddess, like that of Krishna on the temple floor, has become a sacred, living representation of the deity. Holding ghee lamps to illuminate her, they sing to the goddess, beseeching her to bless them with health and provide them with the best husband. On the last and tenth day, the girls create the “most detailed configuration” of the goddess, the *Sanjhi kot*.⁶⁸ Like many festivals in India in which dazzling deities are created only to dwell on this earth for a short while, this most elaborate of all designs is destroyed by “immers[ing it] in running water the next day.”⁶⁹

In villages of the Punjab, in Rajasthan and in areas around Uttar Pradesh women also create Sanjhi on the walls of their homes, but in this case they are not manifesting

⁶⁷ D. Anand, *Krishna, the Living God of Braj* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1992), 175

⁶⁸ Anand, *Krishna, the Living God of Braj*, 192.

⁶⁹ Anand, *Krishna, the Living God of Braj*, 175.

the goddess to ask for her a good husband, they are celebrating and honouring the feminine aspect of God. When women create the great cosmic mother they shape her in a

composition of triangles, entirely covered with multiform and star-shaped clay discs. . . The small clay elements painted white and speckled with orange, blue and yellow cover a starry array, the dark, triangulated shape of the goddess.⁷⁰

The goddess is invited to inhabit her likeness during Navaratri (*nava* nine; *ratri* nights) a festival in October designated for worship of the divine mother, Devi, Maa or Durga.⁷¹

Jyoti Bhatt believes the Sanji [sic] fashioned to receive the blessings of *soubhagya*, good fortune, represents a blurring of traditions wherein the original meaning behind these creations has been lost.⁷² He asserts that traditionally Sanji formed part of a woman's observance of a *vrata*, a vow.

There are over two thousand vratas, many of them linked in origin to the spells and hymns of the *Atharva Veda* and the *Stri Karmani* rituals (women's rituals) described in the *Kausika Sutra*. . . [T]he root of the Vrata ritual lies in the belief that desire, when visualized and made concrete through mandala and activated through spell and ritual gesture, generates an energy that ensures its own fulfillment.⁷³

Vratas are vows undertaken to ensure the welfare of family members, be they living or dead. They can take on any form, from fasting, penance or cutting one's hair, to creating kolams, Madhubani paintings or Sanji. In Western India, from Harayana to Maharashtra, unmarried women create Sanjhi for a period of sixteen days during the Hindu month of Ashwin (September/ October) as a component of *Shraddha Paksha*, the annual honouring of the dead. As part of their *vrata* to ease the distress of those souls who have not found a new body in which to incarnate, they shape reliefs on the walls of their homes studded with mirrors, pulses, flowers, seeds or shells (figure 44). The old Sanjhi is removed daily and, accompanied by singing and prayers, a new one is formed with symbols sacred to each day. Among various tribes living in northern India, these Sanja abodes for the dead are filled with representations of items the deceased enjoyed during his or her lifetime. In this way the soul is provided with all it requires and will not bother the living.

In Malwa, girls creating the Sanjhi pay particular attention to the fifth day of

⁷⁰ Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Museum of Art, 1968), 114.

⁷¹ www.dandiyazone.com/navaratri.html (11 May 2003).

⁷² Jyoti Bhatt, "Sanja, a Traditional Art Form," *The India Magazine*, 11.12. November, 1991: 20-31.

⁷³ Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 117.

Shraddha, which is dedicated to those who died young, before they had an opportunity to marry. The ninth day, *dokra navami*, is reserved for family members who died of old age,⁷⁴ but on the last three days the girls sculpt large bas-relief called *kila-kots*. These are

literally translated [as] ‘fortified dwellings,’ diagrams that are confined by rigid boundaries in which they place the symbols used on all the previous days as well as those images they believe will please the honored spirits.⁷⁵

Some of these motifs include a milkmaid, a pair of women churning buttermilk, footprints, elephants, a chariot, a drummer, or a male and female sweeper.⁷⁶ In days past, the drummer (whose drum is often represented as of half a cob of corn in the *kila-kot*) and sweepers used to be depicted outside the dwelling, indicating their perceived lower status in society, but today, they are often placed within the *kila-kot*, demonstrating “the weakening social stigma of the caste hierarchy.”⁷⁷

In the evening of the sixteenth day, the elaborate *kila-kot* relief is removed and its remnants disposed in a stream or a pond. In all instances, whether to invoke husbands, honour the goddess, or pacify souls, once the invocations have been completed, the ritual image connected with the sacred or intangible realms is destroyed by submersion in water. The power concentrated within each one and the sacred ideas attached to them are thus allowed to easily disperse, re-enter and reinvigorate the mundane / sacred world.

Another *vrata* observed by women in the Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh and one which also makes use of cow-dung, is the fertility rite known as *Harchhat* or *Hala Sasthi*.⁷⁸ During this ceremony women prepare a rectangular cow-dung ‘canvas’ on the wall and a square shaped *pitha*, altar, on the floor of the courtyard. They paint an abstracted image of the goddess *Harchhat Mata* on the prepared wall and fashion seven cows with a calf, as well as a tiger out of clay to place upon the altar. Cow-dung is used to sculpt an additional figure, the goddess *Gauri*, another name for the goddess Parvati (Shiva’s consort), who takes up her position with the animals on the altar. Using cow-dung to fashion the goddess would lend the figure further potency since it is more auspicious than mere mud or clay. In addition to the image of *Harchhat Mata* and the figures, women also decorate a water pot called a *kalasa* to place upon the altar. They fill

⁷⁴ Bhatt, “Sanja. . .”, 28.

⁷⁵ Huyler, “Creating Sacred Spaces,” 188.

⁷⁶ Bhatt, “Sanja. . .”, 28-31.

⁷⁷ Bhatt, “Sanja. . .”, 31.

⁷⁸ Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 121.

a pit with live branches from different trees and place seven types of grain within a leaf cup of the *mahua* tree.⁷⁹ Part of the vrata involves donating offerings such as bangles, cloth and vermilion powder to the tree.⁸⁰

Annakūt

A similar event which involves women sculpting sacred imagery using cow-dung takes place around Braj where the festival called Annakut, *Annkut*, or *Goverdhan Puja*, which occurs a day after Diwali, assumes even greater significance than the Hindu New Year's celebration of lights.⁸¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, Goverdhan Puja is celebrated publicly in temple goshalas where Brahmin priests are instrumental in conducting the rites, but it is also performed privately in the family courtyard. In this context, it is a festival mainly involving the contributions of women who spend days preparing the food offerings and who also sculpt a sacred image of Krishna.

The festival itself is diversely interpreted and celebrated. . . [but] the identity of Krishna–Gopal with the Lord of the hill is taken for granted; in both, the celebration centres on the presentation of the food and its subsequent distribution, as sanctified prasad, to the participants.⁸²

The women not only prepare a large quantity of food, they also fashion either an anthropomorphic image of Mount Govardhana using cow-dung or a depiction of Krishna holding up the mountain. Vaudeville notes that the “rather shapeless effigy” depicting Krishna as the mountain “is made on the ground with cow-dung paste.”⁸³ According to her report, the women conceive of Sri Goverdhan Giriraj's body as a large square with a conical head, two parallel feet and one or two raised arms. The square represents the inside of the mountain and here cotton tufts, weeds and blades of grass depict trees and vegetation. Smaller objects surrounding the mountain are also fashioned using cow-dung; these represent people, cows, dogs, and toys to entertain the deity. In addition, the women sculpt a watchman to keep guard, and a model pot to be filled with milk. Close by, a little

⁷⁹ This tree grows wild in central and northern India; its leaves, bark and flowers are used as food, oil and to brew liquor. Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 182.

⁸⁰ Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, 121-122.

⁸¹ Charlotte Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996), 169.

⁸² Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 170.

⁸³ Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends*, 170.

shrine also molded with the same material contains two cow-dung figurines, Gauri and Ganesha who are both adorned in garments. Finally a lighted lamp placed on top of the head, and a hole created within the square indicating a mouth, finalizes the effigy. The women place heaped plates of food in front of the elaborate makeshift shrine where the presiding deities reside. This display, according to Vaudeville, is known as Annakut.

Another image depicting Krishna shaped by women within the domestic sphere is, unlike Vaudeville's description of Annakut, neither an anthropomorphized mountain nor a shapeless effigy, but rather a carefully sculpted, elaborately decorated representation of Krishna holding up Mount Govardhan, surrounded by offerings⁸⁴ (see figure 45). In the evening a *gopa*, cow herder, accompanied by at least one cow and one bull, comes to sing praises to Krishna. He feeds the divinized mountain's mouth with various foods and fills it with milk before circumambulating the image, as if he and the other cowherds were walking around the holy Mount Govardhan.⁸⁵ Finally all attending the festival perform cow *puja*, the worshipping and honoring of the cow, feed both the cows and the *gopas*, and offer *arati*, before inviting the cows to step through the dung effigy and destroy it.⁸⁶

Mud and Dung Sculpted Relief

In various parts of India women use dung for its malleable and sacrosanct qualities to create ephemeral sculptures within a ritual or religious context. According to Craven villagers still use a mixture of cow-dung, straw and terra cotta to worship images of the 'Great Mother,' in her many forms and shapes.⁸⁷ In North India, in areas including Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, women fashion more permanent bas-relief structures and sculpted decorations within and outside the home using cow-dung. Although it is difficult to differentiate between the sacred and the secular, when considering that the sacred infuses the mundane world at all times, some images or tasks *do* hold more sacred or significant meaning than others. Like the ephemeral *kolams* of south India, or the more permanent *chitta* paintings of Orissa, the domestic bas relief

⁸⁴ Photographer Robyn Beeche kindly sent me this depiction of Annakut.

⁸⁵ Also known as performing parikrama around the holy mountain.

⁸⁶ The light offering – the waving of lights in a clockwise motion

⁸⁷ Roy C. Craven, *Indian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, rev. 1997), 247.

designs are intended to keep evil at bay and to flatter the goddess. However, unlike the impermanent paintings and sculptures created for ritual these decorations are intended to last and some survive up to thirty years. The relief designs are often simple, but Manohar and Shah note that “the images embossed on different surface levels of the walls creat[e] a spiritual environment in the home.”⁸⁸

It is usually up to women to beautify the house. When the home is in the process of being built and the walls are still wet, women extend the cow-dung mud mix to decorate the walls with bas-relief using a variety of design principles they are familiar with. These range from abstract curvilinear shapes and forms to lotuses, elephants, foliage, animal or human figures. Depending on the shape of the home, the designs may be applied to the interior walls, or to the walls of the courtyard facing out into the yard, but relief work which functions to placate and welcome the goddess is also carried out around the front door (figure 46). In Madhya Pradesh women also build and embellish enormous grain bins with pleasing patterns to honour the goddess of plenty and to welcome her bounty.⁸⁹ These storage bins are made of clay and husk and like the walls of the home, they too need to be occasionally restored using a mud and dung base, which is then painted over. The decorative relief work lasts as long as the house walls or the storage bins survive. In addition to applying pleasing bas relief patterns to solid walls, women in parts of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan also design lattice and clay screens to create perforated walls or large windows. The base structure for the *jali*, screens, is bamboo. Besides abstract elements, recognizable details such as fish, cows or snakes may also be added into the designs.⁹⁰

In Gujarat women enhance their sculptural relief work by pressing mirrors into the still wet *gobar-mitti*, mud and dung mixture. This creates sparkling and intricate bursts of light in addition to the play of light and shadow formed by the three dimensional sculpted patterns. They also build elaborate, yet sturdy and functional wall niches by forming a framework of twigs or bamboo, coated with mud and dung, which is then painted.⁹¹ In Gujarat creating bas-relief designs is common both among Hindus and

⁸⁸ Manohar and Shah et al. *Tribal Arts and Crafts*, 95.

⁸⁹ Manohar and Shah et al. *Tribal Arts and Crafts*, 101.

⁹⁰ Manohar and Shah et al *Tribal Arts and Crafts*, 96.

⁹¹ Huyler, “Creating Sacred Spaces,” 185.

Muslims and sometimes entire walls are covered in textured designs (figure 47). Making this type of art is a way of life, it is taken for granted and the designs and techniques for appeasing the goddess are passed on from mother to daughter, but often householders hire women “within their caste or community” who excel in the art form.⁹² They then spend a few days cutting and shaping bamboo, digging clay and mixing it with dung before decorating the home with intricate as well as with functional designs. Often their services are bartered for, but sometimes they are paid in cash. One woman, Sonabai, a non-professional sculptor from Phuphutara, a remote village in Madhya Pradesh, central India, took this art form to new heights and in effect brought it to the attention of the modern/ contemporary internationalized art world public and institutions.

It is common practice in Sonabai’s Rajwar community⁹³ for women to decorate their homes with wall paintings, abstract bas-relief screen work as well as with relief work “using a mixture of clay, cow dung and paddy husk.”⁹⁴ The traditional home of the Rajwar people is single storeyed and has an inner courtyard “surrounded by semi covered verandahs” in which most of the daily living takes place.⁹⁵ Jali screens decorated by the women of the household break the sunlight and allow breezes to move through these inside / outside spaces. Sonabai embarked upon an elaborate decorative program after moving to a large new house where she felt lonely and longed for company, for unlike many women, she did not live with her in-laws, her husband was often away and she only had one son to care for. These unusual circumstances allowed her to spend more time decorating her home than would normally be allotted to other women in her community. In addition to making the relief work and the jali screens, she sculpted figures and animals and soon filled her home with monkeys and plants, musicians and donkeys, Radha and Krsna, bulls and buffaloes, snakes and goats.⁹⁶ These freestanding elements were created by inserting a core of straw, forming a body of dung and clay around it and then painting the figure. The rather geometric style which characterize these figures is the result of this working technique.

⁹² Huyler, “Creating Sacred Spaces,” 188.

⁹³ Rajwars are a cultivating / farming caste in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.

⁹⁴ Manohar and Shah et al *Tribal Arts and Crafts*, 143.

⁹⁵ Jyotindra Jain, *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India* (New Delhi: Crafts Museum, 1998), 47.

⁹⁶ Jain, *Other Masters*, 55.

Circumstances and personality stimulated Sonabai's innovations of one collective folk art tradition; with her individualistic creative expression she transformed the inherited practice. Although she received support from her husband, she came to be seen as an oddity in the village; some neighbours ridiculed her, others admired her. Yet when delegates went villages to look for folk art to establish the new multi arts complex Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal which opened in 1982, they were "wonderstruck" when they encountered Sonabai's house and its art. Sonabai was encouraged to display some of her work at the Bharat Bhavan arts centre and has since received awards for her art. Her work is housed both in museums and private collections. It was included to commemorate India's fifty years of independence in a show curated by Dr. Jyotindra Jain in 1998, and in 1999, Sonabai, now well into her seventies, traveled to Brisbane with her son to participate in the third Asia Pacific Triennial exhibition. With this national and international recognition and with the influx of money into the community, other local women started emulating her style and returned to the tradition with new vigour.⁹⁷ Today this local art form has evolved to become a new collective folk art tradition with each woman contributing new designs. An enormous amount of shifting and innovation has occurred within a tradition which in turn has influenced the local and artistic community. As with the Madhubani art, this is not a static practice, but one in flux, forever shifting and making room with new innovations and one that is also crossing art historical and international boundaries and borders.⁹⁸

Practical Applications of Milk and / or Dung in Folk Art Traditions

Besides the use of cow-dung in the ritual-cum-folk art traditions of relief work and Madhubani, Sheela Gowda's adoption of cow-dung also brings to mind how cow and or buffalo by-products have been used for centuries in the production of painted cloth, an art tradition whose documentation and analysis has by an art history as scripted to date, still largely been ignored. Cow by-products are employed in a folk art technique called Kalamkari which is today practiced by rural women in the southern tip of Andhra

⁹⁷ Jain, *Other Masters*, 54.

⁹⁸ Examples of Sonabai's work may be seen in Jyotindra Jain's book *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, (New Delhi: Crafts Museum, 1998) on pages 48, 49, 51-58.

Pradesh, but in this case the art is not formed with dung, rather it is shaped through it. The Kalamkari process is similar to that used in calico.

The art of painting on cloth is a well-established tradition in India and during the late seventeenth century “calicoes” or “*palampores*, a Hindi-Persian combination meaning bedcovers” proved to be so popular in England, that the British wool and mill industry threatened to collapse under the weight of the painted cotton cloth imported from India.⁹⁹ The cotton was conditioned for painting by bleaching and soaking it in milk mixed with powdered *cadou*.¹⁰⁰ It was then dried, folded and beaten numerous times with a wooden (tamarind) club to soften the fibres. Afterwards the cloth was bleached by steeping it in dung, in a process called “dunging,” which was repeated three times.¹⁰¹ A charcoal outline applied to the material delineated the pattern and natural vegetable dyes such as indigo, madder root, or iron oxide served as paint. In between the layers of paint the cloth was again washed, bleached and beaten. Yellow, the least dependable of colours, was the last colour applied.¹⁰²

Kalamkari literally means pen work, *kalam*, pen,¹⁰³ *kari*, work.¹⁰⁴ The pen used is a burnt and sharpened tamarind twig,¹⁰⁵ but today the term Kalamkari describes three different types of approaches to creating designs on cloth; block printed cloth, block and hand painted designs and hand-painted material¹⁰⁶ (figure 48).

During my fieldwork I encountered hand painted Kalamkari produced by village women for commercial purposes, at *Dwaraka*, a not-for-profit outlet for several village arts projects in Bangalore whose volunteers regularly travel the seven hours by car to Kalahasti, a village in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh, to negotiate with the women and pick up new stock. *Dwaraka* stands for Development of Weavers and Rural

⁹⁹ Gertrude Z. Thomas, *Richer than Spices* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 41.

¹⁰⁰ Rustam, J. Mehta, *The Handicrafts and Industrial Arts of India* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons & Co, Private Ltd., 1960), 120. *kadu*, powdered myrobalans, a fruit.

¹⁰¹ Mehta, *The Handicrafts and Industrial Arts of India*, 120.

¹⁰² “With sour whey, or a solution of India’s all purpose cowdung, native painters lengthened . . . [yellow’s] fickle life. Washed with soap and water, bleached and rinsed again, folded and beaten to a finish, no subsequent use could possibly fade an Indian painted calico.” Thomas, *Richer than Spices*, 45. Hussein Keshani notes that during Mughal times, yellow was also obtained from cow’s urine. In conversation with Hussein Keshani (Victoria: University of Victoria, April, 2003).

¹⁰³ Barnard and Beeche, *Arts and Crafts of India*, 79.

¹⁰⁴ Dwaraka. Development of Weavers and Rural Artisans in Kalamkari Art. Pamphlet

¹⁰⁵ Dwaraka. Development of Weavers and Rural Artisans in Kalamkari Art. Pamphlet

¹⁰⁶ Mehta, *The Handicrafts and Industrial Arts of India*, 150.

Artisans in Kalamkari Art, and it is a non-profit organization formed through the social welfare body called the Ramanarpanam Trust.¹⁰⁷ Kalamkari has its roots in the village of Kalahasti and the kalamkari produced there was traditionally popular in Tamil Nadu as temple hangings depicting the tales from the great Hindu epics.

The cotton fabric used by the village artists is first bleached in dung and allowed to dry in the sun. It is then washed and soaked in milk.¹⁰⁸ Our hostess Raji Narayan described how the chemical constitution of milk acts as a catalyst which allows the natural and traditional pigments to be easily absorbed into the cloth. When purchasing a kalamkari the painted material still carries the odour of sour milk. The art these women produce is sewn into clothing items such as *salwar kameezes* (punjabi suits) and saris or made into wall hangings depicting village scenes and other favourite motifs such as the tree of life, peacocks, Lakshmi or Ganesha. Decorative panels are sewn into household items such as pillowcases, lampshades, tablecloths or napkins and smaller images decorate cards, sunglass cases or purses. Like Sonabai's tradition, which was known only locally and was only revived because of her stylistic innovation and the institutional support she received, Kalamkari is a technique that was on the verge of dying out. Today thanks to charitable institutions such as Dwaraka, women in rural areas can make a living transforming milk and dung soaked cloth into art and new products destined for a wider and ever-growing national and international market (figure 49).

These chapters have demonstrated how the cow and the substances she emanates are highly prized by a wide range of Indians, from the erstwhile artists working on the Ajanta murals, to marginalized women, holy men and folk artists. Cow by-products are not only valued for their practical applications, as fuel, building material and food, but also for their sacred qualities and artistic possibilities. They are vital ingredients used to dye and bleach; to build and shape; invoke and flatter the goddess; to dispel evil and install spiritual and physical harmony; and to mark festivals, celebrations and rites of passage. The examples cited above have been selected among a vast repertoire of

¹⁰⁷ This trust was set up as an *arpanam*, an offering, by Dwaraknath Reddy to his spiritual master Sri Ramana Maharshi, the great sage of Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu. Raji Narayan, one of the volunteers working there, was our gracious host. She described how they requested the male artists to teach their art form to a younger generation of female artists and how some of these students proved themselves especially adept at certain designs. Today their paintings shine for they are infused with lively line work and enriched with carefully executed detail.

¹⁰⁸ Raji Narayan. In conversation with Raji Narayan, Dwaraka, Bangalore, April 2002.

practices to demonstrate how, when Sheela Gowda picks up one of the cow's by-products to create art, she is directly forging links to rural women's lives and art making in diverse parts of the subcontinent, to their painted prayers, their visual invocations to the goddess and their work as designers, builders, wives, mothers, daughters, entrepreneurs and cooks. This act can be analyzed as bringing to public awareness the reality of marginalized women's lives, in addition to expanding upon ancient Indian art traditions. In using cow-dung as a medium Gowda is also tapping into the material as a source of tension for not only is cow-dung a versatile material, it is a multiply-coded substance which assumes numerous layers of significance and meaning depending upon application, purpose and circumstances. Sheela Gowda, growing up in India where rural and urban intersect in a number of ways and with a father whose interest led to his managing a folk art museum, was not immune to the rich and diverse history of this material, its multivalent codings and its socio-political and religious significance.

Chapter Four

Sheela Gowda - the Cow, the Woman and the Dungball in Contemporary South Asian Art

The previous chapters have not only discussed the many ways in which the cow is perceived, they have also addressed cow-dung's multi-dimensional qualities in order to set the stage for how the material may be read when it is manipulated into a work of contemporary art and placed in a gallery. Cow-dung's meaning fluctuates under varying circumstances from being at times conceived of as a filthy material, to one endowed with mysterious and divine resonance so potent, it is used to sanctify spaces and purify the devout consumer, but when it is resituated as art in a national or international gallery where audience members bring to the material their cultural experiences, expectations and preconceptions, the paradoxes inherent to the material are heightened.

Gowda is not unaware of viewer response; artists create art as a visual text that seeks reactions. When audiences view paintings composed of a substance they regard either as a fertilizer, a type of fuel, a waste product, or a sacred material representing the divine feminine, or which they see as blasphemous, inappropriate, juvenile or brilliant artistic expressions, not only are they responding to how Gowda has manipulated and affixed further meaning to cow-dung, they are also adding to its already multi-layered resonance. The additional juxtapositions that arise when Gowda takes this medium into a high art setting are striking, and the tension thereby created in these gallery spaces must seem almost palpable.

In employing cow-dung as a legitimate artistic medium, Gowda may be solely concerned with the material itself, in the *arte povera* sense, as well as with the infinite poetic juxtapositions that occur when it is created into art and placed with other matter and within various physical surroundings. However, in its indefiniteness, ambiguity and subtlety, her art opens itself to being read on many levels. Besides validating art forms produced by women which are usually not registered as such, as discussed above, Gowda's art references Euro-American art movements and functions as a social commentary and critique; it builds on ancient Indian artistic traditions and it also

challenges art historical notions of what constitutes art and the art historical canon. Gowda plays with and subverts expectations, yet choosing this material over all others was not a random act on the artist's part; it was a deliberate one, no doubt inspired in part by seeds planted by her first art teachers, R. M. Hadapad and Prof. K.G. Subramanyan, and specifically, in terms of the timing of her decision, in reaction to the violence of the communal riots.¹ The tension she perceived within the violence propelled her to pick up a substance that also oscillates with tension: between excrement and holiness; between poverty and wealth and between Hindus and Muslims, for the cow, conceived of as Hindu goddess, is increasingly being used as a political tool to heighten communal agitation and further a right wing political agenda.²

Whereas chapter five will focus on the increased politicization of the cow, both as an icon and as a living creature wandering through the streets of rural and urban India, this chapter will look at Gowda's body of work produced mostly in the 1990s and discuss how it may be analyzed as work with a feminist and class / caste conscious message. I argue that in picking up dung, Gowda did so with at least some awareness of fashioning and positioning herself within the international spaces of contemporary art as an Indian woman artist, who is aligning herself with India's rural and urban poor as a way of commenting on aspects of these women's lives. Her use of this material however, was also a way for her to express the tension she perceives between violence and sensuality. Gowda explained how during the riots she was exposed to the daily coverage of events through the media and she received the impression that in the act of committing violence, the rioters almost seemed to be experiencing pleasure.³ She went on to say that it was this odd convergence of violence and pleasure that she was exploring in her work.⁴ As I was unable to follow up on what her reactions were, in more detail, it would be pretentious of me to even try to explain how Gowda sees this connection between violence and sensuality, thus I leave this open and unresolved. I do not know what Gowda has seen

¹ Sheela Gowda, personal communication, 23 January 2004.

² *Collins English Dictionary* defines communalism as "loyalty to the interests of one's own ethnic group rather than to society as a whole." *Collins English Dictionary* Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1999, 324. Communalism is an Anglo Indian term widely used by Indian scholars, bureaucrats and politicians to define "politics and conflict based on religious groupings" such as Hindus and Muslims. Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (London and New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), 4.

³ Sheela Gowda, personal communication, 23 January 2004.

⁴ Sheela Gowda, personal communication, 23 January 2004

and been exposed to that would result in such a strong incentive to create work that explores this issue. I do know that selected acts of violence removed from their original context, repeatedly screened on TV, displayed in slow motion, shown again and again, take on a strange sensual beauty of their own (in my cultural context I am particularly thinking of the striking images of the world trade center being attacked and how that event almost became fetishized by the media). Another possible connection I can think of is how I perceive the Indian body as traditionally visualized and expressed through Indian art. Both male and female sculptures of human and divine bodies are depicted as sensuous. Lips and breasts are full, bellies are alive with *prana*, breath and the statues are generally involved in expressing movement. Further, colours applied and visible in contemporary sculpture and in Indian society at large, in the way people and deities are adorned with flowers and cloth, express a vibrant and sensual approach to life and to the body. Many people also move with an inherent grace, even when crossing incredibly busy streets. Do my associations here run along similar lines as Sheela Gowda's which led her to explore the convergence between sensuality and violence? The beautiful, living breath-filled body -- slashed, contorted, killed? Or is she using the word sensual to describe sadistic pleasure? Is she commenting on the glee of the media in producing sensational images? Readers will have to arrive at their own conclusions.

Because of the meaning residing in the material, Gowda's art may also be read as political, especially in reference to some of the images created with it, and as subversive. This subversion lies in the act of rejecting the colonial import of oil and canvas and embracing, and successively manipulating, an indigenous material into 'high art.' It also resides in how Gowda has taken cow-dung into the gallery where she is in a sense refurbishing the gallery spaces and sanctifying them with a material that is often used by Hindu women to eliminate negative energies. In this case, it may be argued Gowda is using the cow-dung as a transformative material to instill neutrality into the space or environment, to remove, reconfigure and render afresh views, thoughts or ideas around art and the canon. Her art also makes subtle references to contemporary art history in its positioning in the gallery.

Sheela Gowda is not the only contemporary Indian artist who has experimented with cow-dung. In the 1990s, Latika Katt, a committed feminist and a well-known

sculptor,⁵ turned to cow-dung as a medium after her “father’s sudden death pushed her between an emotional and a financial pincer.”⁶ She had been working as a sculptor using more durable and expensive materials such as bronze, aluminum, brass, but also clay, to create both reified busts and heads of well known figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru or the assassinated theatre activist Safda Hashmi, but she was also sculpting abstracted forms commenting on, for example, the 1989 sati of Roop Kanwar.⁷ When Katt observed how cow-dung proved to be a strong enough material that which the poor used to fix broken fences, she soon joined the women collecting the excrement early in the morning. Cow-dung was a cheap and readily available medium that Katt shaped into a series of sculptures.

Katt’s working mode stems from an interest in combining interior space, the abstracted intellectual workings of the mind, with exterior space, the transference of the immaterial into the concrete physical realm of matter. Her approach to working with these antithetical forces and her joy at handling and molding material results in what one critic calls the “biological orientation in Katt’s sculptures,” which appear “plant like, rock like or animal like without being representational.”⁸ Her abstracted images recall the fragility of plants and the way the human race has been strangling the landscape into complying with human needs, imposing grid like networks of streets and cityscapes upon it. This is especially obvious in Katt’s dung image entitled landscape (1992), which is incised with squares and burdened with wooden constructions.⁹ During this period Katt also molded cow-dung into faces that recall masks. Like Gowda, she was inspired by a material which has been picked up and sculpted by numerous women before her with completely different backgrounds and motives, yet like Gowda, she too has reconfigured

⁵ Who today is head of the Department of Fine Arts and Art Education at the Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi http://jmi.nic.in/Fedu/latika_farts.htm (21 March 2001).

⁶ Gayatri Sinha, “India Songs,” *Asian Women Artists*, Ed. Dinal Dysart and Hannah Fink (Australia: Craftsmen House, 1996), 132.

⁷ Roop Kanwar was a young woman who committed sati by either walking into her husband’s funeral pyre and immolating herself, or by forcefully being led into the flames. Regardless of the circumstances, in the eyes of many she is a saint and the place where she committed sati has become a shrine where thousands flock every week bringing wealth and prestige to the community.

⁸ Amit Mukhopadhyay, “Latika Katt: Towards Dematerialization of Material,” *Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India*. Ed. Gayatari Sinha (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1997), 38.

⁹ This image may be viewed in *Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India*. Ed. Gayatari Sinha (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1997).

its meaning and in bringing dung into the high art setting, has raised a number of issues related to art, materials, aesthetics and the reality of many women's lives.¹⁰

By 1993, Sheela Gowda was creating mini paintings out of cow-dung that resemble and refer to fuel pats. They are marked with her handprints and inscribed with gold thread or pigment. As such she is not only drawing on a female-centered substance (in more ways than one, emitted by the cow and mostly used by women) she is also positioning herself with the most marginalized of women in India who have few economic resources, have little in the way of agency and rely on cow-dung as a source of fuel. She is giving voice to the subaltern, to their labour, acknowledging it and validating their art forms created with cow-dung, which are usually not registered as such. Many of these women are considered dispensable, not only in the womb, for as daughters they will present an economic burden on their parents due to the ever popular dowry system, but also as wives, for in some cases if the dowry is not adequate, or further installments cannot be met, they are disposed of by their husbands or complicit parents-in-law, with the law often reluctant to intervene and pursue prosecution. In aligning herself with these women, Gowda is also pushing class – caste boundaries and issues in her country where either being of one caste or of no caste at all, still carries consequences in spite of the non-legality of this system in this nation which is defined as a secular republic.

When cow-dung is used as a fuel, it is usually mixed with straw or chaff and the fuel pats, left to dry on the outer houses of walls or on exposed flat areas, are always marked with the handprints of women or children who have worked them into flat, round fuel cakes. The women leave energetic imprints - traces of their labour - which convey either the dynamic interaction with the materials: rhythmic, even patterns of their repetitious movements, or lethargic, worn out marks made by labourers weakened with hunger, sickness, sorrow, or numbed with the monotony of the time consuming task of making fuel, and feeding a family (figures 50 –52).

¹⁰ According to Kobita Sen, cow-dung is also used in the ancient sculpting tradition of the Lost-Wax Technique. Sen is an artist living and working in Victoria who has a great interest in ancient and traditional sculpture. Indian sculptors using the lost wax casting technique often mix cow-dung with mud to create the husk around the core wax figure. When this is fired the cow-dung / clay mixture produces less shrinkage than a mold created with solid clay would produce, thus when brass or molten ore is poured into the opening, a figure truer to its original dimensions and thus truer to its original form is created. In conversation with Kobita Sen, Xchanges Gallery, Victoria, September, 2002.

Emulating these traces in her art making, Gowda is interested in the distinctive hand patterns left behind on the dung pats, which are created by recurring, repetitive squeezing, shaping, and slapping of dung onto the outer walls of homes and other walls. Gowda refers to this type of activity as rituals of repetition, and she told me, she is not only concerned with the physical manifestation of these women's rituals, but also with psychic state endlessly repeated actions evoke.¹¹ The ritual act, encoded as part of the daily landscape of action, allows for a specific space of associations, or consciousness to emerge, a space which forms between the incessant increments of time taken in the making. Gowda describes this element as one which gives the practitioner time to think, feel and intuit. According to her, the repetitive ritual act produces a condition of being half awake, half asleep, and in this semi-conscious, or altered state of half emotion and half thinking, the space arises wherein you can visualize an image.¹²

Creating her own fuel pats with cow-dung, Gowda not only leaves the imprint of her labour upon them, she marks the patties with additional meaning through inserting or impressing other materials into the raw ingredients. This results in dung-pats embedded with thread, or gold leaf, or marbled with additional pigment (see figures 53 - 55). Some have interpreted these gold threads as representing unlimited sources of energy,¹³ but they could also be references to "women's work," textiles and embroidery, to dung's purifying qualities, to the wealth a cow bestows upon a rural family, or to the wealth implied philosophically by her very being.

These forms become more than just fuel pats; created as objects d'art, they transform into small paintings. Placed in a high art setting, they might stimulate audiences into thinking about marginalized women's labour, yet they would also encourage viewers to think about definitions of art, about traditional materials generally associated with art and maybe also rouse them into questioning how the legacy of a western-imposed art historical canon affects how we value certain materials over others. Using cow-dung in her art, Gowda not only evokes the ever-present contributions of

¹¹ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002

¹² Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002

¹³ This reading to the gold inscribed in dung was given by an anonymous author who compiled some information on Gowda for the Erdekongress in Bonn.

http://www.google.ca/search?q=cache:jHOb71SUUK8J:www2.kah-bonn.de/fo/erde/kongress/biograf_e.pdf+%27sheela+gowda%22+telling+tales&hl=en&ie=UTF-8 (29 June 2002)

women's economic labour and ritualistic actions to the environment and the economy, and is in this way honouring their labour, she also transgresses socially inscribed boundaries by moving dung from the kitchen, or courtyard into the gallery.

In one of her paintings, *8769 miles and an inch*, where she employs cow-dung as sculptural medium to create a textured and variegated surface, (figures 56 and 57) Gowda references various cycles of repetition performed by rural women in south India on a daily basis. The small dung patties attached speak of the cyclic need to collect fuel. The hint of red *kumkum*, vermillion powder, refers to the daily application of the *bindi*, the dot or mark women apply to their foreheads, but it also references how *kumkum* is used on a daily basis within religious ritual to mark the sacred, be this a tree, a rock or a deity (figure 58). The background material itself refers to women's practical application of dung, when it is used in the construction and cyclical repair of domestic housing, but it also references its ritual relevance, when women apply dung to create a clean and sanctified surface upon which to draw *rangoli*, the protective designs inscribed on the earth in front of the entrance to the home. In south India, *rangoli* or *kolams* are created using rice powder, and in Gowda's painting, a suggestive trace of rice flour sprinkled onto the textured surface, which was subsequently covered over after the artist continued to work on this piece, nods toward this widespread practice.¹⁴ The deep fissures which now mark this painting, to my mind reference the many collective miles of rangoli-lines drawn by Indian women over the centuries and in the course of a single day, throughout the subcontinent; they could also be seen as iconic marks of the pathways upon which women walk in search of dung for fuel.

Although Gowda's work is read in relation to the traditional uses of cow-dung, she has "tried to transform cow-dung into an artistic material and to subvert the meanings which are traditionally associated with it."¹⁵ As an artistic medium and a malleable substance cow-dung lends itself to being manipulated in numerous ways. It may be

¹⁴ *8769 miles and an inch* was featured in the traditions/ tensions catalogue as work in progress. It underwent quite a transformation before it was exhibited: the traces of rice flour I interpreted as referencing rangoli were no longer visible. This painting is characterized by dung pats upon its surface and fissures gouged into the dung which in spite of their undulating lines, I cannot help but experience as violence or tension within this work.

¹⁵ Sheela Gowda in an interview with Suman Gopinath for *Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing: Sheela Gowda, N.S. Harsha, Nasreen Mohamedi*. eds. Sarah Campbell and Grant Watson (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2000), 54.

thinned down, mixed with water or acrylic medium, and used as paint. It may be smudged and rubbed, smeared and coloured, or inscribed with charcoal, rice flour or vermilion pigment. It may be cast into relief or sculpted into a three dimensional object. Used as a sculpting material, it can be rolled in various substances such as *kumkum*, and fabric, paper, straw, thread and numerous other materials may be added to it, or imbedded within it, to create a medium which is literally multi-layered.

Gowda has employed the substance in all ways described above. As a thin wash, applied to paintings on paper backed by jute, dung, “treated [and] combined with neem oil” provides a delicately coloured sandy background.¹⁶ When Gowda first started experimenting with the material in 1992, she was still using the figure as a reference.¹⁷ At that time, she utilized the liquid dung pigment to paint abstracted body parts, in particular torsos, as she continued her exploration of disintegration and fragmentation, violence and sensuality. One rather realistically rendered painting from 1992, which uses the medium as a wash to create tan coloured skin, exposes the torso of a woman depicted with one breast missing (figure 59). In conversation, Gowda describes the one breast as sensual, the other as mutilated.¹⁸ Not only has her subject’s breast been violently removed, Gowda has also embedded thorns within this work, and the woman’s body is further mutilated by two strips of vividly flowered cloth attached to her skin in uneven lengths. Here I read Gowda’s use of material and form as describing the stripping of skin, the inflicting of scars and other invasions into the female body. But she seems also to be playing again with the tension of opposites, creating ambiguous spaces that beckon the viewer to fill the gaps with meaning. The jarring juxtaposition of materials coupled with the seemingly careless, playful and colorful rendering of wounds are as disturbing to me as are the incisions themselves, which seem to point to rampant violence committed upon women.

Women’s movements insist that “violence against women is a political rather than a private question” which demands “state intervention and regulation.”¹⁹ In rendering these wounds almost cheaply and trivially, Gowda seems to be critiquing the lack of

¹⁶ Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism. Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 400.

¹⁷ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002.

¹⁸ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002.

¹⁹ Amrita Basu, “The dialectics of Hindu nationalism,” *The Success of India’s Democracy*, Ed. Atul Kohli (Cambridge: UP, 2001), 168.

concern and government intervention, and the unwillingness of police officers to enforce criminal laws when the victims are impoverished women. She may also be commenting on the pursuit of sadistic forms of enjoyment at times exercised by poverty stricken and exploited men, who in the face of their powerlessness may mark their impotence by violent outbursts bestowed upon their wives.²⁰ These wives, born into poverty and without proven structures of social or legal reprieve, all too often adopt a stance of passive acquiescence. The cloth fragments and the missing breast, may be read as terrible wounds, which not only imply the covering up of wounds, or of past scars inflicted on women's bodies by their husbands or by medical practitioners, but also the covering up of so many scars, wrongs, invasions and exploitations committed by capitalist or religious fundamentalist driven governments upon the land, its people and on society in general.²¹

Murthy describes this painting executed on paper, roughly shaped like a torso and approximating life size (27" x 36"), as an "organic torso . . . [frozen] into an inanimate object of decoration . . . [and one that] permit[s] varied and ambiguous interpretations."²² He offers the following reading:

The frontal layer of a female torso with an undulating contour, peeled off and hung like a parched animal skin is quite representative of the way Sheela combines instinct and intellect: the torso here associates itself simultaneously with sensuality and brutality: with the attributes of a hunter's trophy, it makes a direct and simultaneous reference to an aesthetic distance and a possessive instinct combined with the primitive pride of a hunter: the image for all its tender and succulent look, presents a castigating irony in asserting its shocking appearance as a still and mute object of decoration or as a symbol of brutality; secluded and paraded, it also evokes its inherent tenderness to effectively unravel the hypocrisy in our notion of the sacrosanct.²³

Art historically, Gowda is both referencing and subverting the sensuality of the classical, wholesomely two breasted artist's nude. Yet this painting also speaks of various types of violence committed against women, ranging from the unexpressed hostility a small girl may feel due to her gender, to domestic violence. In the way this torso is

²⁰ Sadistic pleasures taken by men upon women are not restricted to any class, though there may be proportionate scale differences.

²¹ In particular I am thinking here of women desperate to abort what may be another girl child who will not only burden the family with another mouth to feed, but with the additional looming of a future dowry to be paid to the groom's family and the cause of much violence committed upon women whose parents may not be able to afford all they promised.

²² K. S. Srinivasa Murthy, "Anatomy of Sacrilege," *Sheela Gowda* (Bombay: Gallery Chemould Exhibition Catalogue, April, 1993), non paginated.

²³ Murthy, "Anatomy of Sacrilege," non paginated.

displayed like that of trophy skin, it scrutinizes power relations and raises questions about religiously and socially ascribed attitudes toward women and other oppressed groups.

From a Hindu perspective, however, Gowda's torso also begs for another reading – one referencing Shiva as Ardhanarisvara, a god who is sometimes embodied as half woman, half man, with the gender split occurring vertically down the middle (figure 60). Shiva Ardhanarisvara always sports his female attributes on the left side of his body, which is opposite to the torso Gowda has painted. Consciously or subconsciously, the artist may be subverting the usual depiction of this semi-hermaphrodite divinity by appropriating the right side as his female side. In being painted by a feminist and critical thinker, this could easily be imagined to incite any fundamentalist Hindu with an interest in contemporary Indian art. As regards a western(-ized) audience, this piece motivates us, the viewers, to question our inherent assumptions about gender, the human body, representations of divinity and how India, although known for goddess worship, is steadfastly holding on to patriarchal structures of power which are also supported by women involved in right wing movements.

Art, once displayed on gallery walls, is open to subjective viewer scrutiny and it will be interpreted according to its emotional impact and the associations it invokes in the viewer's, art critic's or art historian's mind. Labels attached, or artist's statements submitted, often help guide our interpretations, but when the work is untitled, the meaning and impetus for its creation often remains obscure, and it achieves an ambiguous quality which renders the work subject to a greater number of multiple readings than in the case of a titled work. In this case, the artist herself describes this painting as representing the destruction of the mother / land, a provocative statement which lends the work additional readings.²⁴

Whether this statement refers to environmental destruction or is made in reference to communal tension, it also reflects on how India has, since the nationalist movement, been referred to as *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, an entity now not only divided into separate countries - Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh - but one increasingly rent with religious tension. The mutilated breast could be read as symbolizing Pakistan and the Indus River, a rich source of India's cultural and religious history forever cut off and

²⁴ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 26th 2002.

taken away from Hindu and Sikh descendants. It could also be a literal representation of the violent mutilations brutally inscribed upon women's bodies during partition. Urvashi Butalia writes

the violence that accompanied partition marked women and women's bodies in particular ways: we know of the rape and abduction that happened on a mass scale, of the cutting off of women's breasts, the tattooing of their bodies. We know too that in many places women were killed by their families, in others they took their own lives and in some they also participated in the violence.²⁵

An integral part of Gowda's artistic challenge consists of de-centering the Hindu Nationalist "us versus them perception" that facilitates violence and is tied to women's roles as chaste wife and mother. If this is a depiction of a female body mutilated due to the blinding rage of communal violence, then in being painted with cow-dung it acts as signifier endowed with extra weight; this one-breasted torso seems to beg to be read as a warning and as plea to curb the rhetoric and not allow communal tension to explode into acts of violence.

Further, when considering that Gowda refers to this torso as the motherland, in being painted in dung, a material of the earth which returns to the earth, this image also requests for a reading based on the question: what are we putting (back) into the earth? What comes to mind most immediately relates to environmental pollution and its effects on the human body. If we regard the earth as our mother, and India in particular is conceived of in the national imagination as female, then an image painted of a female body in a substance used to nourish the soil seems to ask implicitly of us what our relationship is toward the land. Are we sensitive to the earth's needs? Are we conscious consumers? Is our ecological footprint a light one? What impact are we having on the environment? How can our consumerism be tempered? How can our contribution towards environmental pollution be lessened? In this way Gowda is implicating the viewers; we are no longer voyeurs, but stand accused.

The artist has also used liquid cow-dung pigment to paint lines, gestural fluid suggestions of objects, as well as energetic swirls depicting coils and connoting knots (figures 61-65). This, Gowda says, is an exploration of the quality of line and its potential

²⁵ Urvashi Butalia, "Muslims and Hindus, Men and Women. Communal stereotypes and the Partition of India," *Women and Right-wing Movements*, Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia eds. (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd. 1995), 59.

as an abstract form to denote meaning.²⁶ The tension expressed in the knot and in the coils, which seem to be waiting to be released, reflects the tension of a nation faced with the simmering undercurrents of communal violence and the nasty knot in the stomach when faced with the horror of violence. The knot form also connotes constraint, constriction, and entrapment, whether this be metaphorically or physically speaking, but it also implies a desire for release. The coiled spring and the knot are forms Gowda returns to again and again in her work.

Applied as huge paintings which cover the walls of the gallery, (see figure 65) these cow-dung washes refer back to those used by women to sanctify their home environments and protect them from invisible outside forces, applied to rid the area of malignant energies as well as filth and disease and to create a sanctuary hermetically sealed from the outside world. In this work, then, Gowda may be seen as both washing away malevolence, or anything not constructive to abundance and life, and drawing blessing to the site and subjects of her painting. One of the things I see challenged, or in the need to be washed away, is the set of assumptions about what a western art historical canon assumes to be 'good art,' 'folk art' or 'derivative art,' the latter a term often tagged on to art produced in non-western nations which devalues it because it is read in relation to western art, rather than as a product and expression in its own right. Gowda's large paintings hanging on the white walls of the modernist white cube gallery, not only appear to further sanctify these premises, but to be recouping these spaces from the art historical colonialist legacy. She is rendering them anew, ready to receive Indian art in its many forms and expressions without the overbearing values a western art history and its canon stands for. The knots within the paintings connote the tension created at the colliding of these two worlds.

The manure, applied as a thicker substance in the form of relief, has allowed Gowda to slash and carve into it, to mold it and shape it. Doing so, she has left her hand marks and fingerprints on the substance. Employed as a thicker medium, the artist has embedded various materials and objects, such as hooks and thorns, within the dung. At

²⁶ Victoria Lynn, "Dung Heap. Sensuality and Violence in the Art of Sheela Gowda," (*Art Asia Pacific*. 3:4 1996), 82. Victoria Lynn visited Gowda in November 1995 after the artist's return from the South African Biennale. She is an Australian art critic and curator who in 1993 curated "India Songs," at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney.

one point in our conversation she insinuates that rituals are like hooks, but then she also intimates that the hidden hooks are about self-mutilation.²⁷ Is she referring to Hindu myths and of being hooked, trapped as a woman by religion and tradition? Or is this a reference to Hindu extremism and to the yogis who spear their tongues, or allow a raised arm to wither, fingernails curling and mutating into weird growths and twisted shapes as the arm is held up for years, in an exercise designed to demonstrate mind over matter, as an act of penance or love for god? Created in reference to the riots, the hooks imply to me the hidden dangers of being snared by ideological rhetoric, communalist or any other, but Gowda is clear, when speaking about her work, that she does not want to fetishize and exoticize it in any way or direction; she wants the materials to speak for themselves.

Gowda's paintings, then, contain dual or multiple codings. In one painting from 1992, cloth fragments collaged into the dung, play upon the brown surface (figure 69). They reference the colourful clothing of Indian women brightly dotting the landscape from afar or filling ones field of vision from up close. The remnants are cheap material, derogatorily referred to as *cheety*, a brightly printed cotton fabric favoured by village women. The cloth glaringly speaks of women's poverty, and implicated and represented by these torn remnants, is the looming reality of women's often precarious domestic circumstances, which include the occurrence of dowry deaths.²⁸ Sometimes wives are deliberately dowsed in kerosene and lit on fire, and the subsequent burning to death of a woman whose parents have not been able to deliver all the dowry goods is attributed to a faulty kerosene stove in the kitchen, an item of clothing that caught fire by mistake, or to a clumsy fall.²⁹ The *cheety* cloth in this painting not only speaks of various modes of destruction of women's bodies; according to Gowda, it also speaks of liminal spaces, and references living on the outskirts of a rapidly expanding city, "sandwiched between" an

²⁷ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002. Not wanting to pry I did not ask her to divulge what she meant with this comment.

²⁸ Donald Morrison, *Burning Issues in the Art of Nilima Sheikh*, University of Victoria, Dept. of History in Art. M.A. Thesis, 1994. "The 12-panel *When Champa Grew Up* (1984), is based on both a true story and a folk song. It illustrates the "dowry murder" of a young bride by her in-laws. We see the heroine progress from a playful schoolgirl on a bicycle to an abused young wife cowering in her husband's family's household and then set ablaze in the kitchen. In the last two panels, hired mourners in a tight black circle raise their arms toward the heavens as she rises above the smoke like an ascending angel." http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1248/3_90/83794239/p1/article.jhtml (24 March 2004).

²⁹ Elisabeth Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990), 45-60.

ever-growing urban center and a village forced to adjust and change under its impact.³⁰ In other words, it refers to the encroachment of urban spaces and values upon village life, or of one group's assertion of power over another. This too is a theme Gowda returns to in her later work.

Another theme Gowda explores in this body of work, is myths and rituals. She muses on how many stories in Indian mythology contain "sublimated violence," and some aspects of certain rituals also seem to contain violent motives.³¹ Gowda is interested in exposing how violence percolates below the surface of many myths and rituals in India, just as domestic violence may simmer in the home and communal violence rumble in the land. As communal hostility was starting to gather momentum in the early '90s, the myth of Hanuman inspired much of this body of work (figures 66 –68 & 70). Hanuman is the monkey god who is typically represented showing his devotion to Rama by ripping open his breast to reveal his heart filled with love and loyalty. In Gowda's images the slit, coupled with orange pigment, suggests the open chest of the monkey god. Gowda states that in the case of Hanuman most people focus on his loyalty rather than on the narrative of the self-inflicted violent act. They accept the violence as part of the myth, but Gowda is interested in drawing attention to those aspects of Hindu mythology that contain violent elements as part of devotional behaviour.³²

Besides thorns and hooks, cheety and rice-flour, Gowda also embedded fragments of paper within her art. Some have feet drawn on them, and placed within the painting of a cavity referencing Hanuman's open chest, they create a jarring juxtaposition of linked body parts.³³ Others are faded bits of collaged paper taken from a freedom fighter's notebook; they are inscribed with quotations "tinged with idealism [such as] 'we must not repeat history.'"³⁴ These fragments hint at meaning in the form of a specific message, and rather than closing down dialogue, their ambiguity opens up frameworks allowing for

³⁰ Gowda quoted by Lynn, "Dung Heap," 82.

³¹ Gowda quoted by Lynn, "Dung Heap," 80.

³² I am immediately reminded of the myth concerning Shiva and Sati when Sati, showed her devotion and loyalty to her husband, who had been grievously insulted by her father, by throwing her body into the fire. Shiva was so upset at her death that he took her charred body and, howling with grief, crossed India dropping burning body parts all over India. These are today sacred places.

³³ Hanuman is the great monkey god who helped Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, rescue his wife Sita, who had been abducted by the evil Ravanna, on the island of Lanka. Hanuman's army of monkeys formed a bridge across the water which allowed Rama to retrieve Sita.

³⁴ Gowda quoted by Lynn, "Dung Heap," 81.

greater interpretation.

Gowda's cow-dung paintings and objects, varying in size from brick dung blocks to paintings of 183 cm x 122 cm, may be viewed as figurative abstractions, suggesting a fragmented body. Many of her paintings have slits incised in them, referencing Hindu mythology, Hanuman and his open heart, as well as the wounds of her time, barely, or superficially healed decades after India's partition, and violently reopened with regular occurrences of communal discord (figures 68 & 70).³⁵ Some of her later installations such as *Gallant Hearts* (1996) (figures 71 -73) also return to this form, but now the slit-like incision is no longer a cavity filled with the potential of emptiness or oozing with bitterness, but an object intruding into space. As a western-trained artist Gowda is aware of the "slit as a potent metaphor."³⁶ She is conscious of how it has been used by artists such as Georgia O'Keefe, and how it evokes questions in the viewer of "whether or not the meaning resides in the body (torso) or in the cavity."³⁷ *Kumkum* powder applied to these gashes suggests not only blood, the married status of a woman, domestic violence, and India's political history, but also how red vermilion pigment is anointed to denote the sacred, be this a statue, a tree, a rock or a living being. In addition, applied to a slit resembling a vagina-like opening, the *kumkum* may also speak of the sacred status allocated to women's fertility.

Sheela Gowda created *Gallant Hearts* (figures 71 - 73) in 1996. This installation hangs like an oversized tail, or a dark, enigmatic opening in the gallery setting.³⁸ The gallant hearts shaped from cow-dung, and rolled in *kumkum* powder, look like bloody parcels shriveling in the exposed environment. Apart from the ritualistic aspect inherent in this and Gowda's other works, here too there is tension and a violent undertone, specifically evoked by the title itself which begs the question, whose hearts are these? Are these the hearts of victimized women? Or the hearts of those silenced forever in the Hindu / Muslim riots? Or do these bloody pouches reference the monkey god Hanuman's heart now exposed for all to see? They could also refer to Gandhi's gallant heart, silenced so suddenly in an act of violence when he was shot by a radical right wing Hindu. The

³⁵ See Chapter Five for a further discussion of Wounds.

³⁶ Lynn, "Dung Heap," 82.

³⁷ Lynn, "Dung Heap," 82.

³⁸ This is how Geeta Kapur, art critic and curator, in her article "Framing / Unframing," *The Art News Magazine of India*, Vol. IV, Issue IV, Sept. - Dec. 1999, 70-73, describes *Gallant Hearts*.

idea of a Hindu artist invoking the exposure of innards, entrails, arteries, blood and hearts, not only in this work but in a later one, *And Tell Him of My Pain*, contrasts with how Hindus dispose of dead bodies by cremating them and leaving nothing of the once-living-breathing organism to be seen. Gowda is again playing with tension, juxtaposition, fragmentation and abstraction of the human body, and, as well as referencing the disemboweled and the dead, she is also invoking the presence of the living, by leaving traces of her interaction on the materials. The *Gallant Hearts* hang silently clustered together, arranged in the form of a red gash that protrudes into the gallery space and hovers at over three and a half meters in length like a bloody obstruction. In its three dimensionality, it denies the viewer physical access, but in its slit like form and its evocative presence, it also beckons entry.

In juxtaposing materials that in Hinduism signify the sacred in various ways, and in manipulating them to evoke ideas of *himsa* (violence), Gowda creates tension through the double or multiple codings associated with the materials. Fragmented body parts may recall violent acts of devotion and the anonymous dead, orange pigment may evoke the monkey god Hanuman's presence, and red *kumkum* may signify either violence, or the sacred, but Gowda's work, in its ambivalence, lends itself to being read on numerous levels beyond those mentioned above. Her art resonates on what Gowda calls, "that edge of suggestion," without making overt statements.³⁹

Gowda, in playing with the juxtaposition of materials and linking substances of different value, causes the viewer contemplating the work to oscillate between two or more modes of reference. In her article on Gowda, Geeta Kapur citing feminist art historian Julie Ewington notes how "materials in installations often do double work - as the subject of a sign *and* as its content. This is a highly unstable oscillation between codes. And its instability is exciting."⁴⁰ Working with cow-dung has allowed Sheela Gowda to make explicit references without being overtly polemical. In this case, the medium is the message, whether she squeezes raw patties into *kumkum*, or molds the material into luminously streaked plaques.

³⁹ Lynn, "Dung Heap," 80.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Geeta Kapur in "Framing / Unframing." *The Art News Magazine of India*. Vol. IV, Issue IV, Sept. - Dec. 1999, 70-73.

In 1992-93, Gowda created a series of eight icon-like dung and gold relief paintings (figures 74 & 75). On the one hand, the materials (cow-dung and gold leaf) were specifically used to reference the place she was preparing to show her work, at an exhibition in Johannesburg, South Africa. Johannesburg's wealth was not only built on gold-mining, Gowda told me she plastered the gold leaf onto dung to also reference apartheid.⁴¹ In some of these paintings the dung is brilliantly inscribed with gold leaf hand and footprints, and when I first saw these relief works the imprints immediately reminded me of how India is conceived of as a landscape alive with remnants of a mythological time when the gods played upon the earth. India is home to numerous place legends featuring the divine *lila*, play, of the gods, and as discussed in chapter two, many of these involve cows whose shapes and powers gave rise to important visual components of India's sacred geography.

Anyone familiar with Hindu mythology who sees golden footprints combined with the earth-like substance of dung, cannot help but recall the many place legends that circulate in India justifying the existence for this temple or that holy city. Banaras is conceived of as Shiva's city. He is said to not only have lived here with Parvati, but to have created the very ground upon which the city is built.⁴² Many places in India bear traces of the gods' presences, from Vraj, where Krishna lived, to the river Ganges, who as the goddess Ganga, fell through the locks of Shiva's hair to flow on earth as the holy river. Pilgrims travel to these and numerous other *tirthas*, places on earth where the gods are said to have " 'crossed down' into this world," for spiritual sustenance.⁴³ As a wandering goddess, blessing and nourishing the earth with her by-products, the cow too plays a significant role in sanctifying the ground. However, when I shared this interpretation of the artist's work to her, Gowda explicitly stated that this was not the intended reading and explained how she had created these relief works specifically for Johannesburg.⁴⁴ Dialoguing about a work of art, once it has left the hand of its maker, draws on the multi-vocal potential that springs into being between a work of art and each person who accords it some time, some sensory response and some reflection.

⁴¹ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002.

⁴² Diana Eck, *Banaras. City of Light* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1983), 94.

⁴³ Diana Eck, *Darshan, Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 68.

⁴⁴ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002.

Linking dung with gold is such a provocative gesture that it evokes numerous interpretations, especially when considering its Indian context. It reminds me of a literal and amusing interpretation of *gopuram*. A *gopuram* is an enormous gate built like a tower that flanks south Indian temples. These gates are covered in many tiers of lively sculpture portraying gods and holy people painted in luminous colours using generous amounts of gold. *Go* is the Sanskrit word for cow, so Gowda's creation of cow-patties, or relief works in which gold is combined with cow-dung, might also be read as an artistic shorthand or abstraction of the *gopuram*.

As previously discussed, juxtaposing dung with gold also recalls how during their initiation ceremony young males from the highest caste partake of *Pancagavya* (five by-products from the cow) as *prasad*, blessed, sacred food.⁴⁵ This may also be administered at death. Although cow-dung and gold suggest exploitation and poverty and signify substances on opposing ends of the scale such as riches and excrement, or the exploiter and the exploited, when considered as a healing *prasad*, cow-dung assumes the rank of gold. Viewed in this light, gold leaf and dung combined are materials no longer in opposition, but standing on equal ground. Indeed, applying gold to dung may also be interpreted as referencing how kumkum is applied to statues of deities, or to trees, as a way of anointing them and honouring the powers they represent. When considering how Lakshmi is thought to reside in dung and is also conceived of as the cow herself, this gesture of smearing gold onto dung could also be read as honouring the dung goddess, and in this sense the meaning of the materials is inverted, the dung now assumes higher ranking than the gold.

Because so much of the meaning in Gowda's use of cow-dung resides within the material itself via social codings, the positioning of her art within the gallery setting, or outside of the gallery altogether, is also crucially significant. Whether the dung cake blocks of 7.5 cm x 23 cm x 12 cm are set in a curved line within the gallery space, structured like the wall of a well, or placed at the bottom of bottlebrush trees, as they

⁴⁵ Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, Personal Interview, Chennai: May 8th 2002, and confirmed by J.Gonda, *Vedic Ritual, The Non-Solemn Rites* (Leiden – Köln: E. J.Brill 1980) and D.N. Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (London and New York: Verso, 2002). The five products from the cow are dung, urine, ghee, curds and milk

were in the 1995 Art and Nature Workshop in Delhi, the meaning is also inscribed in the positioning (figures 76 - 78).

Mortar Line (figures 76 - 78), bricks placed within the gallery space to form a curve, appears to be an oblique reference to contemporary western art history, minimalism and the American artist Carl Andre, who made placing bricks in formal lines his artistic trademark. The viewer familiar with Andre's personal life will be struck by the jarring content implied in this simple line of bricks, for Andre was married to one of America's foremost feminist artists, Ana Mendieta, whose art work took the form of using her body as canvas and tool. She often smeared it with mud as she merged with the landscape, or sculpted her silhouette within the earth, and in introducing her body and bodily fluids into the gallery, raised "the problematic of nature and culture."⁴⁶ Ironically and sadly, she met her death in 1985 when she fell from her apartment and merged with the earth so forcefully that the impact killed her.⁴⁷

Studying this work, and knowing that Gowda with her degrees and training would be aware of both Mendieta's and Andre's art practices, I could not help but draw parallels between Andre's hard edged bricks set in straight lines upon gallery floors, and Gowda's dung bricks, fashioned by herself and laid out in a gently curving line. These bricks have a groove carved into them which is tinged with red pigment, so the curved line occurs both on the gallery floor as an installation in space, but is again repeated through the red groove running within the bricks which now function as a shaped canvas. The bricks speak so eloquently of that convergence of nature and culture; not only do they resemble the colour of mud Mendieta so often smeared herself with, the hint of red also recall her blood paintings as well as her tragic death.⁴⁸ I read this line of bricks as a nod toward Andre, but simultaneously and more so, as a tender tribute to Ana Mendieta.

Some of Gowda's work is less densely layered however. When she places bricks to create a structure resembling a well⁴⁹ (figures 79- 82) this combination of place and form immediately recalls the harsh realities of women's labour. The well points specifically to women, not only for reasons discussed in the text, but due to the female /

⁴⁶ Geeta Kapur, "Framing / Unframing," 72.

⁴⁷ André was tried, yet acquitted for murder.

⁴⁸ Ana Mendieta created gestural blood drawings using blood obtained from butchers in performances.

⁴⁹ Gowda created this installation for a site-specific work at Buddha Jayanti Park, New Delhi, at the Art and Nature Workshop, 1995.

feminine symbolism of water and containers. This simulated well, built over a natural depression in the landscape also recalls harsh aspects of the land, the often relentlessly burning sun, the endless weeks of no rain, and the continuous toil and struggle many women face in finding and carrying water.⁵⁰ It raises issues of access to clean water, the way access is often denied within rural settings to those considered of lower caste for fear they will pollute the well with their presence, the absence of water in some rural areas, or in urban settings, where women wait patiently with their colourful plastic water containers for the water trucks.

Gowda used seventeen bags of cow-dung to create the well and to form plaques streaked with gold to place under the bottle-brush trees on the site.⁵¹ She created this installation as a response to the site itself. In doing so she:

wished to underline the specificity of the site: the linear grace and texture of the trees, the sepia colour of the ground, etc.. The choice of material was intended to blend or highlight the elements of the site in a subtle way. Finding the right formal language was, as much as anything else, the point of the work.⁵²

When Gowda places bricks on the gallery floor I read this move as an art historical reference and a more abstractly conceptual statement, but stacked in the shape of a well, set within the landscape these bricks become an integral part of the land itself and a comment on the relationship people have with the earth and its resources. It also brings to mind the sight of women working in saris on urban construction sites bearing heavy loads of bricks or sand on their heads in the searing hot sun. With the addition of a foot print inscribed on a brick to form part of the well, I read these cow-dung bricks as also referencing the work of village women who use cow-dung as an architectural material with which to plaster their *kacha* mud homes, either to repair them after monsoon rains, to shield them in a protective energetic envelope, or to redecorate them in preparation for festivals.⁵³ Although I am only aware of Gowda discussing formal qualities in relation to this work, in embedding a footprint within a brick, she appears to be commenting on the plight of economically disadvantaged and marginalized women

⁵⁰ 'Art and Nature', International Workshop and Exhibition sponsored by Lalit Kala Akademi, the Japan Foundation, and Max Mueller Bhavan at Buddha Jayanti Park, Delhi, 1995.

⁵¹ Bottle brush trees have showy red flowers which grow around the tip of the branch's stem and resemble colourful bottle brushes (*Callistemon rigidus*).

⁵² Sheela Gowda in an interview with Suman Gopinath, Campbell and Watson, eds. *Drawing Space*, 53.

⁵³ Absorptive materials such as mud or clay which are vulnerable to absorbing malignant energies as well and thus need to be regularly replastered using a cow dung mix.

who in struggling to survive, have little or no agency, and can offer little or no resistance to ideological pressure.

From Draupadi's Vow to Neff Weight Buthi

Some of Gowda's cow-dung works were shown in 1994 at the first Johannesburg Biennale, "Africus," which was curated by Geeta Kapur and Shireen Gandhi. Between 1996-1998, Sheela Gowda's art works travelled with the *Traditions / Tensions Contemporary Art in Asia* show, organized by the Asia Society, New York, an exhibition which was also shown in Canada, Australia and Taiwan. In 1998, Sheela Gowda was awarded the newly inaugurated Sotheby's Prize for contemporary art in India for her works executed using cow-dung. Gowda notes "a whole traditional art practice existed in India until modernism began to evolve here. I have that as my history. Most artists are looking at their own traditions as well as trying to negotiate other sources in their work."⁵⁴

Gowda is one of the few secular artists working in India today who does not shy away from using materials sometimes considered sacred by Hindus, such as cow-dung or *kumkum* powder, and who also does not recoil from making references to Hindu gods and Hindu myths. Many contemporary Indian artists have distanced themselves from referencing any aspect of Hinduism lest they be somehow associated with the values espoused by the reigning BJP *Bharatiya Janata Party*, the Indian People's Party. Instead, some urban artists, in an appeal to stop the insanity of violence instigated by radical communal ideas, will reference Mahatma Gandhi, who espoused non-violence in an attempt to stop the rise in religious tension, in their work. *Moving Ideas: A Contemporary Dialogue with India*, a touring, multidisciplinary event organized by Hoopoe Curatorial in 2001-2, which was shown in Montreal and Vancouver, not only featured numerous artists and art forms, but also various venues comprising separate shows.⁵⁵ One, *Secular Practice: Recent Art From India*, was displayed in three different venues in Vancouver

⁵⁴ Sheela Gowda in an interview with Suman Gopinath, *Drawing Space*, 59.

⁵⁵ One of them, *Secular Practice*, was shown in three locations: at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Charles H. Scott Gallery, and the Contemporary Art Gallery. Another exhibition, *Dust on the Road*, took place at Presentation House Gallery and *From Goddess to Pin-up* was displayed in West Vancouver at the Roundhouse Community Centre. Most of the shows ran from February 16th to March 31st 2002.

during February 2002. At the Charles H. Scott Gallery, Nalani Malini projected her video installations onto a white sheet of salt crystals, referencing Gandhi's famous salt march; at the Contemporary Art Gallery Atul Dodiya's large watercolours depicted realistically rendered images of Gandhi. Gowda was also one of the artists invited to exhibit her art at the Contemporary Art Gallery and her work, *Draupadi's Vow* stood out, for it was the only artwork on display within *Secular Practice* with an explicit reference to a Hindu myth.

Gowda created *Draupadi's Vow* in 1997 (figures 83 & 84). It is an artwork linked thematically, formally and in its use of materials to her previous works in cow-dung and to her large rope installation, *And Tell Him of My Pain* (figures 87 - 89) which was on display in the next room and will shortly be discussed. The coconut fibre thread, laboriously knotted, is drenched in cow-dung and inscribed in kumkum powder. It hangs like a tail from gleaming and curved needles whose sharp ends point out. The needles and the red kumkum visually link the viewer to the needles attached to the vein-like bodies in the next room, and just as the entrails of that installation seem to have been removed from the body, and like the bloody packages of the *Gallant Hearts* previously discussed, the ponytail, silently hanging, looks like discarded long hair traced in blood. Here the coconut fibre, delicately and painstakingly knotted, references both the violence and sensuality underlying many Hindu myths including the story of Draupadi.⁵⁶ To visually emphasize this message, *Draupadi's Vow*, tinged in red, hangs darkly like a slit, or a ponytail from the white gallery wall, projecting fierce bent needles just above eyelevel. Again, the juxtaposition of the materials is startling. The knots thickened with cow-dung and dipped in red *kumkum* powder, are meant to resemble droplets of blood as well as uncombed, knotted hair that offers resistance.⁵⁷ The slit like installation, which could be interpreted here not only as an intrusion into gallery space, but also as an opening into the depths of the past, of histories, identities, or mythologies, beckons the viewer to contemplate what lies beyond and beneath the present.

The story of Draupadi and the fatal dice game is a well-known tale from the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata which was screened on TV and became an important

⁵⁶ Elements in this story are of greed and devotion, violence and lust. The story of Draupadi is both sensual (she was married to five brothers and was forced to undress in front of her enemies) and violent.

⁵⁷ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002.

rallying point for the BJP.⁵⁸ Draupadi was the common wife of the five Pandava brothers who, in a game of royal dice, gambled over the kingdom with their enemies, the Kauravas. The Pandavas lost their kingdom, but their humiliation did not stop there. Their wife Draupadi was dragged by her hair into the room where the Kauravas intended to disrobe her. She prayed fervently to Lord Krishna for help, and miraculously as her sari was being unraveled by eager hands, the cloth of her garment kept lengthening and hindered the victors from undressing her. The Pandavas were banned to the forest and there Draupadi vowed she would not bind up her hair again until her husbands killed the evil Kauravas and she could bathe her hair in enemy blood. Her curse finally became a reality when Bhima, the strongest of the brothers, succeeded in ripping open the belly of his enemy. Then he disemboweled him, drank his blood, summoned Draupadi and poured blood on her hair; only now could she return to coiffing in her usual manner. Possessed by a frenzied rage, Bhima went around killing randomly until he returned to his senses; at this point he fell to Krishna's feet and was blessed by the god. In this installation, as in *Gallant Hearts* and Gowda's paintings referencing Hanuman, Gowda is not only commenting, exploring and laying bare the tension underlying Hindu myths, she is also implicitly critiquing these TV celebrations of Hindu fundamentalism which are additionally popularized through the media.⁵⁹

And Tell Him of My Pain, (1998) (figures 87 - 89) resonates formally as well as thematically with *Draupadi's Vow*, both in its use of needles, thread and kumkum and its underlying allusion to violence. In its exploration of the line it is also a formal continuation of some of Gowda's earlier cow-dung works such as *Mortar Line*, although she abandons cow-dung in this installation. In *And Tell Him of My Pain* Gowda plays with multiple forms of tension to create an intriguing, multi-layered work of art.

Formally, *And Tell Him of My Pain* plays with the tension between the gallery space and the artwork. It is a line drawing placed in three-dimensional space which fills the whole room. Usually paintings / drawings are contained and framed by the size of canvas or by a frame imposed around the art. Viewers looking at framed art tend to stop in front of a painting, shift their attention to the left or the right to read the title of the

⁵⁸ Sikata Banerjee, In conversation, Victoria: April 7th 2004.

⁵⁹ In conversation with Sikata Banerjee, Victoria: April 7th 2004.

work, then again peer at the work of art before moving on. Gowda's *And Tell Him of My Pain* invites the viewer to walk into the drawing / painting and become part of the art itself. The only frame holding this sculpture in place is the room itself and what the eyes focus on at any one given moment. According to Geeta Kapur, the installation not only "dematerializes space," it also "challenge[s] body scale" and "radical[ly] unfram[es] . . . the exhibition space."⁶⁰

Gowda describes this artwork, which consists of 108 needles and 750 feet of red thread, as the body, painstakingly threaded into each needle, the head.⁶¹ The thread is doubled over, bunched and held together with *neem* and glue.⁶² The resulting red rope, ritualistically inscribed with *kumkum* and cracking under the strain of its own being, is looped and draped in the modernist white cube gallery, which emerges as the frame containing this three-dimensional drawing. The viewer entering and stepping through the drawing becomes part of the picture and thus stands accused within it as they investigate the quality of line and contemplate its meaning. About this work Sheela Gowda notes:

"And Tell Him of my Pain" was a sequel to a smaller work done in 1997. This earlier work was done a few months after the birth of my son. Working under time and space constraints, I had a 'vision', of a work using needles and threads. This, through the process of working evolved into cords, which seemed to meander back to my ongoing preoccupation with the line/drawing. An earlier work called 'mortar line' consisting of cowdung bricks also scratched a line sculpturally. These consisted of 10' to 50' long cords hung on the wall as simple line drawings. The next year however I wanted these cords to involve the whole room, the wall, the floor, ceiling and the viewer. I decided to use the entire length of a ball of thread, unbroken, as determining the length of the finished cord, each measuring around 750' in length. The cords' final length thus became 350' each.

The process of making the cords is as follows: A needle is threaded through with the 750' length of thread (red in colour). 108 needles were therefore threaded with 108 threads. The needles were brought to the centre of the 750' length and the thread was doubled up from this point (as in preparation for sewing by hand). The 108 needles become a bunch at one end and the threads now 216 in number formed the long trail. This was then anointed, from the needle end, with a mixture of wood glue and red pigment called *kumkum*, incidentally the pigment worn on the forehead of Indian women and also used in rituals. The paste is rubbed onto every thread and smoothened on the surface to make a cord of the whole length except of the last 5 to 10' of the thread, which is left uncoated to emerge as individual threads once again. There are 2 such cords, each approximately 375' in length. These are then installed in a given space as a sculptural line drawing. The

⁶⁰ Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism*, 402.

⁶¹ Sheela Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 26th 2002.

⁶² *Neem* is here employed as an antiseptic to deter insects that would have been present in the turmeric. In conversation with Gowda on April 26th 2002.

installation is site specific. But it is relational, to the dynamics between the 2 cords, to the head (the needles) and the tail (the loose ends) and the body, which is the rest. In each of the 5 venues that the work has been exhibited in, the installation has been different. The most satisfying installation was when I showed it the first time in Tokyo, where I was given the choice of having a white cube space (about 6m) and flooring which was a neutral grey. The work is minimal and other stronger elements in the same exhibition space would be challenging to counter, which was the case in the other four venues. In two venues, I have been present to see/feel the space and install accordingly. In the other two venues, I was shown the space before or photographs of the space, dimensions, elements in it were provided for me to make installation plans, which were detailed, right down to the number of screws and their positions. The work “And Tell Him of My Pain” worked for me at many levels, a crucial factor, which motivated me to execute an artwork that was very labour intensive. Yet the final appearance hides this aspect, was minimal and addressed my formal concerns as well. I particularly like its movement from being a drawing on the wall to becoming sculptural in places. The work evolved to have many connotations: an umbilical cord, a creeper, a cable, a reference both organic as well as to an industrial product. Deceptive, seemingly mass-produced product but revealing itself only on a closer look, to an interested viewer, to be something else. The making of this work was like a performance for me, a private one. It was crucial that the needles went over the entire length of thread, as a passage through a closed conduit, but here, creating a body/mass even as they went through it!⁶³

Of course, this installation, *And Tell Him of My Pain*, like Gowda’s other works of art may be read on many levels. It may be a personal reflection on the experience of giving birth.⁶⁴ It could be regarded as an alternative way of drawing a rangoli, but this time instead of using rice flour on the ground, which is devoured by hungry insects and is walked through and smudged, Gowda is instead invoking the magic inherent in the diagram by randomly draping a permanent and solid line vertically, as well as horizontally, within the space. Through the use of materials, this sculptural line drawing has strong links to women and it suggests women’s labour, be this labour in reference to giving birth, an aspect of ritual, or employment. The title of the work has a clear feminist message: it implies a woman suffering for or being exploited by a male figure in her life, be this a boss, a husband, a father, a son, a pimp, a god or a Hindutva politician.

Gowda’s red looping ropes resemble body parts: “umbilical cords” that point either toward her own experience of giving birth, or toward the ubiquitous pressure for women to produce male heirs in India; intestines spilled out on a gallery floor; a

⁶³ “Artist’s statement.” Date unknown. Sent to me by the artist, Jan. 23 2004. Figures 85 & 86 depict Gowda working on this installation in her studio.

⁶⁴ Kathlyn Liscomb, In conversation, Victoria: April 7th 2004.

comment on the kidneys and body parts more and more desperately debt ridden Indians are forced to sell; blood trails left by young girls painstakingly embroidering textiles for the foreign market, pricking their fingers and ruining their eyesight along the way.⁶⁵ Although Gowda maintains she would like the work to be read on a mere formal level,⁶⁶ the title of her work, the jarring juxtaposition of materials, the glistening sharp steel needles almost magically attached to thread emerging from a vein-like body and hung like innards in a gallery viewers can walk into almost as if they were entering a bodily cavity, create a visceral response in the viewer.⁶⁷ The colour of the line and the nature of the materials Gowda employs invoke complex, multi-faceted and multi-layered experiences and subsequent readings. Laurence writing on the work in Vancouver notes that the “‘fragile and perishable’ nature of Gowda’s materials also function . . . as a metaphor for the ‘condition of Indian nationhood,’” and when considering India’s recent history, the blood shed and the lives lost through partition and the recent riots, this is certainly an apt analysis.⁶⁸

Private Gallery (1999/2000) (figures 91-96) is a self-reflexive work which references the tension Gowda’s cow-dung work produces in the modernist white cube gallery setting and the tension of two worlds, the urban and the rural, converging. *Private Gallery* reflects on liminal spaces and the clashes which occur when two opposing worlds collide, be these the worlds of tradition or modernism, poverty and consumerism, village or city living. *Private Gallery* creates a small cube, a world unto itself, but it is a cube far from being white. It is a freestanding installation set up in the corner of an art gallery, which consists of two door-sized panels (6’ 6” x 4’) set at a 90-degree angle and covered with matte Formica sheeting.⁶⁹ Upon first glance the viewer perceives a pink and beige marbled plastic façade resembling a sterile kitchen or bathroom wall and formally referencing both minimalism and modernist home spaces, yet upon closer inspection a

⁶⁵ Geeta Kapur also refers to them as “disemboweled innards” in *When was Modernism*, 401.

⁶⁶ Gowda, In conversation, Bangalore: April 29th 2002. This idea was again stated in her interview with the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis in 2003 when she says: “What’s really important for me is the formal aspect of the art work and in ‘Tell Him of my Pain’ the ability of the object to become a 2-d drawing on the wall and fusing into a sculptural presence on the floor and of it being abstract as well as meaningful, is equally important to me.” <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/exhibition/> (10 May 2003).

⁶⁷ This was certainly my experience as I walked into Sheela Gowda’s installation on display in Vancouver’s Contemporary Art Gallery in February 2002.

⁶⁸ Robin Laurence, “Moving Ideas: Secular Practice,” *BorderCrossings*, Issue 82, 2002, 75. 73-76

⁶⁹ Measurements supplied by the artist when I visiting her in Bangalore on 26th April, 2002.

space is detected between both gallery walls which beckons entry. Once inside this intimate 5' x 5' setting, shielded away from the outside world of modernism and middle class values, and surrounded by a faint grassy smell emanating from the material, the viewer is transported into another world, that of rural India. Hundreds of thumb-sized miniature cow-dung pats line the panel's interior walls which have been coated with a thin layered wash of cow dung. Gowda has rendered these cow pats small, in roughly the size they would be perceived when travelling by and quickly catching a glimpse of cow pats through a moving car window. Indeed one of the water colour paintings is of a car window. This, the village life style, is a world the art gallery visitor will likely only encounter from a distance; equally the *Private Gallery* is a world rural women who shape these patties will likely never enter. These are two worlds colliding. The artist and the viewers stand between.⁷⁰

Along with the patties, Gowda has attached small watercolour paintings depicting objects and people's faces to the inside of the panels as well as to the white gallery walls. Hans Varghese Mathews notes that these unframed paintings pinned to the surface single out hues in the formica and "somehow bring or continue into the work's own space the look of the formica," but they also pick up the hues of the dung pats.⁷¹ These portraits, landscapes, street scapes and details of trees and flowers, some of them framed by car windows, lend additional insight into rural India, yet incongruously, these are images from India's Silicon Valley, Bangalore, a city which has grown to encompass numerous little villages, such as the one Gowda lives in, which remain as pockets of rural life sandwiched between urban developments, yet without a surrounding natural landscape to sustain them. Douglas Fogle writing for the Walker Art Center's website where *Private Gallery* was on display from March to May, 2003, describes how "In this work, as in the history of the hyper-development of Bangalore itself, the urban and the rural come

⁷⁰ In his essay, (an untitled, undated essay written in response to *Private Gallery*, a copy of which was given to me by Sheela Gowda), Hans Varghese Mathews writes that "the work attempts. . . to test its beholder's understanding of themselves as political creatures. . . [it] attempts to . . . deduce out of the beholder of Painting, let me say, beholders who will be able - - while they occupy the space the work appropriates for itself from the gallery- - to place themselves 'between' the city and the village in ways that *test their comprehension of themselves as political creatures*, as citizens involved with 'villagers' in just the way they *in fact* are, as subjects and agents of power." Hans Varghese Mathews is an art critic from Bangalore. An untitled, undated essay written in response to *Private Gallery*

⁷¹ Hans Varghese Mathews. An untitled, undated essay written in response to *Private Gallery*.

crashing together.”⁷² No longer rural, these areas are nonetheless, not yet urban and so exist in a liminal space. This installation was first shown in Mumbai (Bombay) in *The Tale of Six Cities*, in January 1999, and most recently at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Fogle comments on how “Gowda’s gallery offers a public and a private face to this onrush of globalization, being sure to humanistically honor (the mark of the hand with cow-dung) those who are being displaced in the process.”⁷³

Some of the Gowda’s most recent works involved making art with incense paste, but the artist returned to work with cow-dung when she participated in an exhibition called *Cabin Baggage*. This took place from 16-21 January 2004 in Bombay and was a project organized by ‘Open Circle’ at the ‘World Social Forum,’ a body founded in 2001 in Porte Aegro, Brazil. The conference, which attracted over 100,000 people, was accompanied by a number of multi-disciplinary events, performances and exhibitions. It was held at the same time business leaders and politicians gathered in Davos, Switzerland for the ‘World Economic Forum.’⁷⁴ The ‘World Social Forum’ defines itself as

an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centred on the human person.⁷⁵

There were a number of exhibitions curated under various themes. *Cabin Baggage* focused on nomadic lifestyles in the age of globalization and on the idea of being in transit, a state which is experienced by hopeful migrants and corporate jet setting executives, as well as by devouring tourists and worried refugees.

Cabin Baggage addressed issues of discrimination at airports and departure points for international travel, which have evolved since 9/11. Although some people travel freely, others, perceived to be associated with terrorism or Sars, may face harassment, interrogation and even incarceration. The idea for the show was that the cabin baggage created by the participating artists represented the luggage they refuse to check in; it is something they carry their resistance in.⁷⁶

⁷² Douglas Fogle, <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/artists/index.wac?id=85> (3 June 2003)

⁷³ Douglas Fogle, <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/artists/index.wac?id=85> (3 June 2003)

⁷⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3417059.stm> (14 March, 2004).

⁷⁵ <http://www.r-a-i-n.net/workshop/projects.asp?pID=51> (14 March, 2004).

⁷⁶ <http://www.r-a-i-n.net/workshop/projects.asp?pID=51> (14 March, 2004).

Gowda responded by creating “Nett Weight (Buthi)” (buthi is Kannada for bundle). The work consists of a stick with a bundle attached, as a way to reference an almost universal icon of the wanderer leaving home with a stick and a cloth bundle attached to it” (figure 97).⁷⁷ Gowda made a long unplayable flute to function as the stick, implying that no happy music played in blissful reverie will be accompanying this wanderer on her travels.⁷⁸ The stick holds a net bundle revealing its contents. Upon first impression these look like a supply of food, or like rotis, flatbreads, taken on the journey as fuel for the body,” but these rotis are inedible.⁷⁹ They are created with cow-dung, however, as cow pats in their original form, they too function as a source of fuel (figure 99). As luggage, this cabin baggage would indubitably be turned back at the border, for feces would be considered a substance ripe in bacteria and harbouring a potentially deadly virus which could infect another country.

The roti / cow-dung pats are cast on CDs; in fact they are cow-dung CDs, and as such they create an astonishing juxtaposition and form a startling co-joining of two worlds which seem so remote and far removed from one another as gold and dung are on first glance, yet both speak of possible contamination (figure 98). The dung speaks of physical viruses; the CDs reference computers and virtual viruses which know no borders and can easily infect “the net,” the global system of information exchange. The linking and merging of these two materials the cow-dung and the CDs also addresses the deep seated fear of contamination experienced by some upper class brahmins who may work with computers and CDs, and the need ingrained in them to avoid coming into contact with aspects of life deemed polluting.

Like all of Gowda’s art, this work too is multifaceted. The title also seems to be alluding to profit, disposability and the nett worth of human beings. Are citizens of some countries inherently considered to have a greater nett worth than others? The work addresses various levels of meaning, and hints at numerous possible readings, yet shown within the context of The World Social Forum its message seems clearly political. As an

⁷⁷ Sheela Gowda, personal correspondence, 21st January 2004.

⁷⁸ The swag traditionally belongs to the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised, those who have nothing to lose as they set off on their journeys, but it also references the tarot card “the fool,” the holy wanderer who takes off with a bundle attached to a stick on his or her back and ventures forth in innocence and with complete faith that this journey is a necessary one, a vital step in a long road to spiritual awakening.

⁷⁹ Sheela Gowda, personal correspondence, 21st January 2004.

artist of colour carrying such dubious cabin baggage, this traveller could easily be detained, subjected to questioning, quarantined away, humiliated and stripped of his / her rights, for in the age of post 9/11 personal rights have been subjugated by the state's mandate to implement all possible venues to disrupt terrorism networks. This passenger, carrying possible unknown viruses, would likely be seen as a threat to international security. In creating art with such a violent juxtaposition of materials, Gowda is also emphasizing the fact that a broad range of India's population does not have access to CDs and computers and that 98% of Indians will never travel by air, so this clashing of worlds takes on even broader significance, for it highlights the injustice of economic disparity.

Using cow-dung in her work Gowda has picked up a material which resonates with multi-layered histories and various meanings; she has transformed it into art which not only addresses those levels of significance, but opens it up to further interpretations. In embracing a substance imbued with a long history of artistic and ritual expression, I have argued that Gowda is defining herself as an Indian woman artist in the international spaces of contemporary art. In using an indigenous women-centered medium, I have suggested that she is addressing and referencing a number of issues through her art: the colonialist legacy of art history and a canon which seems ill adjusted to fit Indian art in all its various expressions between its pages; the reinterpretation of ritual action; the acknowledgement of the many uses of cow-dung in women's lives, from its sacred to its practical qualities, and in rendering visible that which was formerly considered private or social, a comment on, and validation of her sister's labour. Through her art, Gowda is giving voice to marginalized women's traditions and politicizing their poverty, exploitation and the violence committed against them by opening these aspects of their lives up to public discourse.

In addition, in creating art with cow-dung, Gowda is also admitting the problems associated with the ever-present and increasingly controversial sacred cow, that aspect of the divine mother who is a wandering embodiment of religious tension and is today a hot political topic encumbered with idealism, emotion, and histories. The last chapter will discuss the rise of communalism, the riots in India during the 1990s, the increased politicization of the cow and the role this animal has played in relation to communalism and Indian politics.

Chapter Five

Communalism and the Politicization of the Cow

When Sheela Gowda embraced cow-dung as an artistic medium, it was a deliberate act born from the need not only to reevaluate her work, but also to comment on the nature of the violence instigated by fanatical communal factions. Gowda was reacting to the violence of the Bombay riots of 1989 and the Hyderabad riots of 1990 in particular, but riots also rocked many a city in India, including her own, Bangalore, after the destruction of the 464-year-old Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992, in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh.¹ This was a huge event in India's history and it acted as an incentive for many artists to voice their concern and frustration at right wing extremism and to even adopt materials and ways of expressing themselves that they may otherwise not have implemented.² Instigated by the *Hindutva*, Hindu revivalists, many who were also members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),³ the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP),⁴ or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP),⁵ the demolition of the mosque was undertaken because Ayodhya "had to be released" from occupation by, what they claimed to be, a non-indigenous religion, and the locale restored to featuring a Hindu temple commemorating Rama's birthplace.⁶ The destruction sparked anger and frustration, not only at the rioters, but at the government and policing bodies as well, who seemed incapable and unwilling to stop the confrontation and the ensuing riots, which resulted in numerous deaths on both sides, and in unheard of damage. In 1992-3, "Bombay burned

¹ Victoria Lynn, "Dung Heap. Sensuality and Violence in the Art of Sheela Gowda," (*Art Asia Pacific*. 3:4 1996), 82

² Anuradha Roy, *Wounds* (Calcutta: CIMA, 1993)

Sheela Gowda *Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing: Sheela Gowda, N.S. Harsha, Nasreen Mohamedi*, eds. Sarah Campbell and Grant Watson, (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2000), 60. I will discuss the artists' reactions to Ayodhya in more detail later on in the chapter.

³ National Self-Help Volunteer Corps, also known as the National Self-Help Association, or the Hindu Home Troops.

⁴ Hindu World Council, also known as the World Hindu Conference

⁵ Indian People's Party

⁶ Tapio Tamminen, "Hindu Revivalism and the Hindutva Movement." *Temenos*. ed. Tore Ahlbäck. Turku: Finnish Society for the Study of Comparative Religion, Vol. 32, 1996, 221-238.

<http://www.abo.fi/comprel/temenos/temeno32/tamminen.htm> (10.Sep.2003).

(Tapio Tamminen is a professor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology, University of Helsinki).

for over six weeks,” and during this period over 900 people died in this city alone where the police, with their communal bias, stand accused of playing no small role in contributing to the death toll.⁷ Nationwide, in 1992 and 1993, 2932 deaths and 18067 injuries were attributed to communal tension.⁸

In order to understand what led to the general unrest in India, what role the cow played in inflaming tension between the Hindus and Muslims and how this affected the language of artists, part of this chapter is devoted to a brief history of Indian politics and communalism, with the intention of situating Sheela Gowda and her art making within a nationalist context to clarify how cow-dung is a medium resonating so strongly with political significance. It concludes with a brief description of Indian artists’ responses to communal events.

A Brief History of Indian Politics and Communalism from the 1880s to 1947

The radical communal parties who had a hand in agitating the masses and in destroying Ayodhya, were born in the late nineteenth century as a response to imperial rule.⁹ Some of them were initially part of the Indian National Congress which held its first meeting in December 1885 in Bombay.¹⁰ Seen as moderate political agitators, the liberal nationalists of the Indian National Congress resolved to use western models to instigate change in India. In collaborating with the British, they sought to challenge foreign dominion by fighting from within, using, so to speak, the tools of the oppressors. But the more radical elements within the party, known as the National Revolutionaries, or the Hindu Revivalists, promoted the idea that Indians needed to look back to antiquity in order to free themselves of imperialist rule. Two distinct strands of thought emerged within the party each with fundamentally different ideas about working towards a postcolonial society: the modernists “welcomed British constitutional reforms,” while the

⁷ J.B.D’Souza. “Controlling Riots,” *Communal Riots. The State and Law in India*, ed. Iqbal A. Ansari (New Delhi: Institute for Objective Studies 1997), 32.

⁸ Padam Roshia, citing *Crime in India: some major trends, BPR&D*, Ministry of Home Affairs, 1995, in “Communal Riots- a Failure of Governance.” *Communal Riots. The State and Law in India*, ed. Iqbal A. Ansari, (New Delhi: Institute for Objective Studies 1997).

⁹ The term communalist refers to loyalty to the interests of one’s own ethnic group rather than to society as a whole. Collins English Dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1999), 324.

¹⁰ Herman Kulke, Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India* (London and New York: Routledge 1998), 260.

revolutionaries rejected “British granted reform” on the grounds that they “would only strengthen the fetters of foreign rule.”¹¹ The latter group took an aggressive stance, looking toward the *kshatriya*, warrior caste, and Vedanta philosophy for inspiration.¹²

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the cow has played an increasingly central role in communal politics, but even prior to that, during imperial rule, issues around taboo animals flamed passions and tension. From the 1750s onwards the British, employing Muslims to work as butchers, set up numerous slaughterhouses to feed the colonizers. Muslim leaders such as the Mughal Emperors Babur (1524-30), Akbar (1556-1605) and his son Jehangir (1605-27),¹³ had issued anti- slaughter legislation to ensure amity with the Hindu people, yet the British unashamedly overlooked historical precedents.¹⁴ The India war of 1857 was a direct consequence of colonialists blatantly disregarding social practices and religious sentiments concerning animals. When commanding officers ordered their Muslim and Hindu troops to “bite off the tips” on the New Enfield rifle’s greased cartilages, both groups refused, one believing they were greased with pig fat and the other with cow fat.¹⁵ The “insurgents” were discharged from service and sent home to their villages where their rage spread like wild fire from one community to the next in north India’s heartland. Wolpert notes: “By May 1857, when the torch of Mutiny ignited the cantonment at Meerut, north of Delhi, all of Oudh and Delhi itself were dry tinder awaiting Revolt.”¹⁶ Without the British presence, and the colonial government’s blatant disregard for indigenous sentiment regarding taboos around cows and pigs, the sacred cow issue which incites such passion among Hindu and Muslim communities, may never

¹¹ Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India*, 1998, 260.

¹² The RSS, the National Self-Help Volunteer Corps, founded in 1925, was built upon this idea. They hold training camps divided into four age groups, disciplining young boys and men as warriors, military style, in both mind and body. Although the RSS was popular it had at first no political party, so in 1951 the Jana Sangh party was created to be its voice; this party “merged into the Janata party in 1977; broke away in 1980; then reformed as the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1980,” today India’s ruling party (Atul Kohli Democracy and Discontent (Cambridge: UP, 1990),43. Today the RSS has around 300,000 shakhas, each containing 50-100 male members. They engage in physical training from 5-9 am, spend the afternoons studying, possibly discussing such themes as dharma, the kingdom of Rama and India’s pre-Muslim golden age when India was studded with temples, and then perform physical training again in the evening. Tapio Tamminen, “Hindu Revivalism and the Hindutva Movement,” Temenos, 231. Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (London and New Haven: Yale UP 2002), 57

¹³ Roy C. Craven, *Indian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976, rev. 1997), 200-205.

¹⁴ Deryck O. Lodrick, *Sacred Cows, Sacred Places: Origins and Survivals of Animal Homes in India*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1980), 64.

¹⁵ Stanley Wolpert, *India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 53.

¹⁶ Wolpert, *India*, 53.

have grown to occupy such a large space in the political imaginings of the Hindu community as it does today.

Cows were the cause of further unrest. Shortly after Congress formed, the first of many (recent) riots between Hindus and Muslims broke out in 1893 in Uttar Pradesh due to cow protection movements instigated by the Arya Samaj and the anti-kine-killing movement.¹⁷ Members were rescuing cows from Muslim slaughterhouses in one of the most thickly inhabited areas of India. The Gangetic plain in Northeastern India, the site of Ayodhya, is known both as India's cow belt and as India's historic "heartland."¹⁸ During this period, radical nationalist communal groups from northern India, among them the Prayag Hindu Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha, instigated cow protection programs and fought for other Hindu interests such as script reform; they advocated replacing Arabic script with Devanagari (derived from Sanskrit) when writing in Hindi.¹⁹ Both issues served to mobilize the masses. Stein notes: "both peaceful *and* violent methods as well as secular *and* communal objectives occupied the same historical moment, and both nationalisms henceforward represented alternative political trajectories for different Indian groups or for the same groups at different times."²⁰

The First World War tempered radical elements within the Congress Party. One of them, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, jailed for six years as an extremist politician,²¹ formed an alliance with lawyer Mohammed Ali Jinnah who in 1913 joined the Muslim League.²² Tilak took over as Congress leader and established the Congress – League Alliance in 1916, and together he and Jinnah "charted actions against the British."²³ Although Tilak recognized that radical politics were impossible during war times,²⁴ he succeeded in alienating many Congress moderates. Differences between factions were soon forgotten, however, when after the First World War the British wanted to continue with "the wartime repression of sedition."²⁵ This provoked such a strong and unified response, it

¹⁷ Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 283.

¹⁸ Stein, *A History of India*, 285.

¹⁹ Stein, *A History of India*, 287

²⁰ Stein, *A History of India*, 286.

²¹ Aurobindo, another extremist, escaped arrest by fleeing to Pondicherry

²² Stein, *A History of India*, 298.

²³ Stein, *A History of India*, 298.

²⁴ Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India*, 263.

²⁵ Kulke and Rothermund, *A History of India*, 264.

allowed a new political voice to emerge: that of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Congress Party's new leader from 1920.²⁶

Gandhi, the *vaishya* son of a minister, had many connections to the Bombay Muslims.²⁷ He acted as an intermediary both in communicating Hindu discontent to the British, and in voicing Muslim grievances expressed through the Khilafat movement to the Hindus. During massive rallies held in New Delhi in 1919, Hindus and Muslims collaborated to demonstrate peacefully together, but in spite of initial cooperation, throughout the middle and late 1920s, riots between the two erupted in northern India stretching from the Afghani to the Burmese border over cow-slaughter and Muslim competition for jobs.²⁸ In 1924, hundreds lost their lives in Malabar, and whenever there were rumours of cow-slaughter, further riots erupted. In 1931, a large riot in Kanpur was activated by a decline in demand for Muslim hand woven products, as opposed to factory-produced merchandise produced by Hindu owned mills, and further riots broke out in places such as Bengal over old feuds between landlords and tenants of different religions.²⁹

Many factors added to the increasing division between the leading political parties. Jinnah was frustrated with what he perceived as Gandhi's "unrealistic, irrational and unpredictable leadership."³⁰ He had been critical of Gandhi's involvement with the Khilafat movement and withdrew from politics, but later returned in 1913 as leader of the "more militantly separatist" Muslim League.³¹ In 1928, Jinnah's plea for Hindu / Muslim unity in the "constitutional project" had been rejected by members of Congress who were afraid of losing the support of conservative Hindus.³² "Inflammatory religious campaigns" such as the ones instigated by radical Hindu nationalists belonging to the Hindu Mahasabha, who not only rallied for cow protection, but were intent on assimilating Muslims by 're-converting' them,³³ were ignored by Congress and this,

²⁶ Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India*, 265.

²⁷ *Vaishya* refers to the trader caste. Stein, *A History of India*, 300.

²⁸ Stein, *A History of India*, 286-7.

²⁹ Stein, *A History of India*, 311.

³⁰ Wolpert, *India*, 64.

³¹ Wolpert, *India*, 64.

³² Stein, *A History of India*, 316.

³³ Many lower caste Hindus, or those deemed at the time 'untouchables', renamed Harijans, "Children of God" by Gandhi, and today known as Dalit, had converted to Islam in order to escape the ostracisation of being an out-caste.

along with the fact that members of Congress continued to foster close personal relations with radical leaders, further alienated the League.³⁴

Another decisive factor in the souring of the Congress / League relationship was Mahatma Gandhi's strong and unwavering stance on cow protection. Gandhi felt that cow protection was central to Hinduism. In the early 1920s, Gandhi stated he wished for "Mussalmans. . . as the countrymen of the Hindus, out of regard for the latter's susceptibilities, to give up cow-slaughter."³⁵ In 1927, his further musings on the cow expressed in *Young India* envisioned state-run scientific dairies to ensure a constant supply of milk and non-violent cow by-products, state run tanneries and model cattle farms, the previously mentioned *goshalas*.³⁶ During the next period of mass civil disobedience initiated by Congress in the 1930s, Muslims, weary of the unwillingness shown by Congress leaders toward concession, withdrew their support.

The Congress Party was now under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, a left wing socialist educated in the United Kingdom and elected as leader with Gandhi's blessing. Nehru, however, was consistently thwarted in his efforts to implement radical social change because of his "subordination" to Gandhi.³⁷ The 1935 Government Act, imperiously passed by the British with little input from Indians, resulted "in the imperial center being stronger than ever," yet Congress again rejected efforts by the League for a coalition.³⁸ Rebuffed, the League "intensified its ideological differences with the Congress" in order to ensure success in future elections.³⁹ In 1937, Congress won a sweeping majority of seats everywhere except in Bengal and the Punjab; the Muslim League had only managed to secure one quarter of the seats reserved for Muslims.⁴⁰ Thus the divide increased and communal strife again commenced in India's heartland. By now members of both Hindu and Muslim communities had formed paramilitary organizations, and both sides had disciplined fighters at their disposal.

³⁴ Stein, *A History of India*, 310.

³⁵ Mahatma Gandhi. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Chapter 36, Part Five. "The Khilafat against cow-protection?" (12 Oct. 2003)

<http://www.nalanda.nitc.as.in/resources/English/etext-project/Biography/Gandhi/part5.chapter36.html>

³⁶ *Young India*, 7-7-1927, "Cow Protection, Mahatma Gandhi's Sound Advice, Circa 1927."

<http://www.puripada.com/mahacow.htm> (12 Oct. 2003).

³⁷ Stein, *A History of India*, 337.

³⁸ Stein, *A History of India*, 340.

³⁹ Stein, *A History of India*, 340.

⁴⁰ Stein, *A History of India*, 338.

Initially Gandhi had received support for his political stance from the more radical elements, the revivalists, but they soon

rejected his ascetic non-kshatriya style of leadership, his definition of dharma as the nonviolent pursuit of truth as well as his idea about the Indian nation as a brotherhood of different communities. They preferred 'himsa' (violence) to 'ahimsa.'⁴¹ (non-violence)

They also felt that Gandhi's *satya graha* (holding on to the truth) resistance expressed through non-cooperation⁴² was wrong, and that the "weakness" of the Hindu community, its "degeneration," could only be overcome if Hindus adopted stronger community ties and a *kshatriya* (warrior caste) outlook.⁴³ In sum, revivalists held fundamentally different views from Gandhi on what it meant to be a Hindu and a Nationalist. Gandhi, however, saw no conflict in being both a devout Hindu, who tolerated other religions, and a committed nationalist. In fact, he argued that his "tolerance and pluralism. . . stemmed from his religiosity."⁴⁴ Radical Hindu Nationalists, on the other hand, not only insisted on assimilation, they also maintained that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians belonged to different and distinct societies.⁴⁵ Because they saw religion as forming "the foundation for the basic social identity," they felt it determined social and political relationships and a 'real' Hindu or Muslim could therefore affiliate with only one political faction.⁴⁶

Jinnah's thoughts on nationalism echoed those of the Hindu communalists. Jinnah, a brilliant lawyer and the founder of Pakistan, was not a particularly religious man, but he alleged inherent cultural differences between Islam and Hinduism, perceiving them not so much as "religions in the strict sense of the world, but . . . [as] different and distinct social orders."⁴⁷ From 1939 onwards, Jinnah identified Hindu and Muslim India as separate nations informed by different ideologies incapable of reconciling their differences. In 1940, he argued that "they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions."⁴⁸ He also received the backing of the British who found him more rational and approachable than

⁴¹ Tapio Tamminen, "Hindu Revivalism and the Hindutva Movement," 221-238.

⁴² Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 260.

⁴³ Tamminen, "Hindu Revivalism and the Hindutva Movement," 221-238.

⁴⁴ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 69.

⁴⁵ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 62. Demonstrated by those intent on 're-converting' Muslims

⁴⁶ Tamminen, "Hindu Revivalism and the Hindutva Movement," 221-238.

⁴⁷ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 71.

⁴⁸ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 71, quoting from Jinnah's address given in Lahore in March, 1940. Varshney claims that this speech "formed the intellectual bedrock for Pakistan." (331).

the *Mahatma*. When the Second World War broke out and India was declared at war, Congress “withdrew political support from the British Raj” which resulted in Congress activists spending much time in prison during the war.⁴⁹ The British viewed the Hindus as “‘cowardly traitors’ to the Crown,” whereas the Muslims were seen as “‘staunch friends’” and many of them served in the Indian army.⁵⁰ When Jinnah demanded the formation of a separate nation as the solution to the communal problem, little could be done to dissuade him and the Muslim League from forming a new nation. During 1946 and 1946, the mass exodus of an estimated ten million Indians, of Muslims to the newly defined territory of Pakistan, and of Hindus and Sikhs from there to India, toward an as yet unidentified arbitrary border line drawn up hastily by Cyril Radcliffe, resulted in brutal and violent killings, enormous bloodshed and the death of over one million people.⁵¹

1947- Ayodhya

That physiological and psychological wound etched across this ancient country has not stopped oozing; it has continued to throb through the decades since. Sudhir Kakar, a psychoanalyst, remembers his childhood home overflowing with refugees after partition and he recalls numerous stories told about atrocities witnessed.

It is sobering to think of hundreds of thousands of children over many parts of the subcontinent, Hindus and Muslims, who have listened to stories from their parents and other family elders during partition and other subsequent riots on the fierceness of an implacable enemy. This is the primary channel through which historic enmity is transmitted from one generation to the next as the child, ignoring the surface interpretation and rationalizations, hears the note of helpless fury and impotence in the accounts of beloved adults and fantasizes scenarios of revenge against those who have humiliated his family and kin.⁵²

Although India became independent in 1947 and was in 1950 founded as a Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic,⁵³ based on the cultural idea of “tolerance, pluralism and syncretism,” the secularist spirit infused with hope and institutionalized by

⁴⁹ Wolpert, *India*, 67.

⁵⁰ Wolpert, *India*, 67.

⁵¹ Wolpert, *India*, 69.

⁵² Sudhir Kakar, *The Colours of Violence* (New Delhi: Viking, 1995), 39.

⁵³ K.L. Chanchreek and Saroj Prasad, ed. *Crisis in India* (Delhi: H.K. Publishers & Distributors) 1993.

India's first generation of Congress Party leaders, could not counter a wound that runs so deep, nor could it heal a trauma which refuses to be wiped away, especially with continued hostility over Kashmir and with repeated flare ups in communal riots over the years since partition.⁵⁴ While communal emphasis on religious, cultural and social difference had to some extent, been kept in check by the young democracy, beneath the surface communalism continued to smolder.

After Nehru's death in May, 1964, when Indira Gandhi won elections in 1967 with only a 54% majority, she inherited "a rather brittle" Congress Party."⁵⁵ In 1969, the party split and the more conservative elements of the old guard left. This year also saw a serious communal riot flare fast and furiously in Ahmedabad, killing 630 people in the first five days.⁵⁶

After the Congress party split, Gandhi continued governing with the support of the communists, Sikhs and regional parties and her election campaign of 1971 *Gharibi Hatao* (beat poverty) was highly successful.⁵⁷ By 1972, she was at the height of her power; she had beaten her adversaries, the erstwhile elements of Congress, and had won the third war against Pakistan over Kashmir, however, with the oil crisis, economic decline and strikes, the country was increasingly bereft with problems. By 1975, the country, as well as the party, was in a crisis. Through "her charisma" Gandhi had created a party "utterly dependent" upon its leader; not only had she reacted strongly to criticism which resulted in the suspension of "state level leaders," she had eliminated intra-party elections which might have produced strong leaders opposing her.⁵⁸ According to Atul Kohli all of these elements "contributed heavily to the destruction of the party as an organization."⁵⁹ In addition, in 1975 Gandhi's election victory of 1971 was deemed invalid by a court ruling, and in order for her to continue her rule, a national emergency was declared which lasted two years.⁶⁰ During, what some have called the "Reign of Terror," inflation was curbed, but strikes were outlawed, civil rights were suspended and

⁵⁴ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 61.

⁵⁵ Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India*, 302.

⁵⁶ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 220.

⁵⁷ http://www.workmall.com/wfb2001/india/india_history_the_rise_of_indira_gandhi.html (19 Jan 2004)

⁵⁸ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 75.

⁵⁹ Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent* (Cambridge: UP, 1990), 190.

⁶⁰ Gandhi was found guilty of having made inappropriate use of government facilities in her campaign.

Gandhi had thousands of her opponents jailed.⁶¹ Gandhi's son Sanjay, increasingly aligning himself with "unscrupulous elements," instigated a mass sterilization campaign in northern India⁶² In the name of beautification, slums were erased and thousands of the most marginalized were displaced.

In January 1977, Indira Gandhi released those in jail and named another election. Yet by now Congress had lost all credibility. Not only the government, but also the bureaucracy was charged with corruption and the Anti-Corruption Act did little to curb the practice, for the price of commodities had also risen dramatically.⁶³ Gandhi lost the election but due to internal disarray the opposition was incapable of holding on to power and in 1980 Congress was reelected. Once back, Gandhi continued toppling those in power who led state governments not aligned with Congress. In their place she appointed Congress loyalists who in not being elected by those they governed, were weak in their positions.⁶⁴ During this comeback she also abandoned her pledge to the poor and her "anti-poverty rhetoric" gave way to "communal themes" of "Hindi hegemony" as she tried to "appeal to India's Hindi heartland."⁶⁵ She also instigated communal discord among the Sikhs by supporting a young fanatic who broke ranks with moderate Sikhs.⁶⁶

Between 1980-84 Gandhi increasingly called upon the armed forces to resolve violent domestic quarrels for by now communal conflict was on the rise.⁶⁷ Kothari describes 1984 as "the rise of the terrorist state" for by the end of that year those in authority were unable to govern without resorting to paramilitary and military forces.⁶⁸ He states "large and creative minorities [were] fast losing faith in the system while the people at large felt rudderless and driven by forces beyond their control."⁶⁹ At the local

⁶¹ http://www.workmall.com/wfb2001/india/india_history_the_rise_of_indira_gandhi.html (19 January 2004)

⁶² Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India*, 304.

⁶³ M.B. Chande, *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Indian History* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors 1995), 403. I use this source with trepidation. It uses inflammatory language and appears to be a rather dubious source which makes absolutist statements about prehistoric races in Hindusthan and about the Rig Veda being 10000 years old.

⁶⁴ Atul Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent* (Cambridge: UP, 1990), 64.

⁶⁵ Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent*, 309-10.

⁶⁶ Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was to be her demise. He eventually hid out with his troops in the Golden Temple of Amritsar which the Indian army stormed in 1984. Gandhi's Sikh body guards assassinated her in retaliation. Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India*, 308.

⁶⁷ http://www.workmall.com/wfb2001/india/india_history_the_rise_of_indira_gandhi.html (19 Jan 2004)

⁶⁸ Kothari, *Communalism in Indian Politics*, 90-91.

⁶⁹ Kothari, *Communalism in Indian Politics*, 92.

level secular dialogue was replaced by communal voices gathering momentum, and although terrible riots occurred in Delhi after Indira Gandhi's assassination (which, Kothari ascertains, were not just communal riots, but state sponsored and premeditated attacks on minorities) most further communal clashes took place in Gujarat, where the Hindu right steadily gained more ground.⁷⁰

When the population voted for Rajiv Gandhi, he was possibly benefiting from a sympathy vote, but Congress had campaigned vigorously not only with anti-Sikh themes, they had also wooed the Hindu vote, and received strong backing from the RSS.⁷¹ Yet Gandhi inherited a demoralized Congress, a struggling economy, and conflict in the Punjab, with Pakistan and with Sri Lanka. In 1985, it was revealed that his government was involved in an espionage ring and in 1987, the population found out that a huge contract sold to Sweden had been negotiated through bribing Indian politicians.⁷² 1986 saw the Supreme Court ruling in favour of a Muslim woman (known as the Shah Bano case) who sued her former husband for maintenance. Orthodox Muslims argued that the court had no place in interfering with Islamic law and when Gandhi eventually sided with them against the Supreme Court ruling, he paved the way for ethnic and religious nationalism. He also conceded to Hindu nationalists' demands over Ayodhya, and when he opened the mosque for Hindu worship, he encouraged increased polarization between the communities.

In November 1989, the opposition parties campaigned with promises of "removing corruption and restoring the dignity of national institutions,"⁷³ and the BJP captured a large number of seats; their presence rose from 2 to 108.⁷⁴ Although support for Congress was strong in the south, Congress was unable to form a majority coalition and Gandhi resigned. V.P. Singh led the National Front, a coalition of socialist and regional groups. In Gujarat, the BJP had "filled the organizational void created by Congress" and worked on building a grass roots organization.⁷⁵ As interest in the

⁷⁰ Kerosene and phosphorous were present to help burn living humans, and police personnel who were actively involved in looting and rape and did not respond to appeals of help. Kothari, *Communalism in Indian Politics*, 101-110.

⁷¹ Maya Chadda, *Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1997), 114.

⁷² This is known as the Bofors scandal. According to Chadda, it had been in the works since 1978.

⁷³ http://www.workmall.com/wfb2001/india/india_history_the_rise_of_indira_gandhi.html

⁷⁴ Kulke and Rothermund. *A History of India*, 311.

⁷⁵ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 242.

Congress declined, the BJP rose in popularity. By 1995, the BJP accumulated 42.5% of the vote in Gujarat, and in 1998 the national average was 25.6 %, which resulted in the BJP forming a governing coalition.⁷⁶ The BJP, along with its allies the VHP and the RSS, were instrumental in mobilizing forces for Ayodhya.

Ayodhya

The issue over Ayodhya had been brewing for years and its eruption played a crucial role in transforming the art of many artists who “launched into another realm of practice altogether.”⁷⁷ The followers of Hindutva believe Babar, (1524-30) the founder of the Mughal Dynasty, ransacked a Hindu temple dedicated to Rama and built a mosque over the site, but historians claim that this idea emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and was disseminated by the British who interpreted “every clash between the communities as a communal riot.”⁷⁸ Controversy over the site gained momentum when violent disputes occurred in 1912-13 over the issue of cow slaughter,⁷⁹ again in 1934, when a cow was sacrificed on Id-ul Zuha day and outraged Hindus destroyed two of the mosque’s domes, and then in 1949, when during the recital of the Ramayana outside the mosque, an image of Rama was reported to have appeared inside the locked edifice.⁸⁰ Nehru ordered it removed, but courts undermined the injunction. Although fundamentalist historians are still struggling to verify Ayodhya as Rama’s birthplace and archaeological digs have yet to find evidence of a Hindu temple, popular Hindu imagination has fervently come to believe Rama was born here.⁸¹ Clever campaigns leading up to the destruction of the mosque helped spread this notion.

Various activities were undertaken to place the Ayodhya issue in the limelight. In

⁷⁶ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 73, 244.

⁷⁷ Robin Laurence, “Moving Ideas: Secular Practice” (*BorderCrossings*. 82. 2002), 75-76.

⁷⁸ Neera Chandhoke “The Tragedy of Ayodhya.” *Frontline*. 17.4. (June / July 2000).

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<http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl1713/1713170.htm> (26 Oct. 2003).

⁷⁹ Danish A Khan, “Nationwide ban on cow slaughter mooted.” *The Milli Gazette* (Indian Muslims’ Leading English Newspaper)

<http://www.milligazette.com/Archives/15082002/1508200247.htm> (12 Nov 2003).

⁸⁰ Chandhoke “The Tragedy of Ayodhya.”

⁸¹ Thapar, Lecture: “Politics and the Indian Past.”

1985, the *Ram Janaki Raths*, a series of processional chariots, was launched from twenty-five locations to arrive in Ayodhya as part of the 'liberation' campaign.⁸² In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi declared the mosque opened for *puja*. This ruling resulted in massive Muslim led demonstrations in Delhi and subsequent riots.⁸³ Hindu Nationalists, however, demanded more: the destruction of the edifice and the erection of a temple to Ram. Alarmed, the Babri Masjid Action Committee organized a march to Ayodhya in 1987; the VHP retaliated by preparing its own event. The resulting tension caused riots in various cities in Uttar Pradesh and the march was cancelled.⁸⁴ In 1989, the VHP, a militant organization which had been busy training both the Bajrang Dal, a youth corps for men, and the Durga Vahini, one for young women, announced its intention to lay the founding stone for Rama's temple in Ayodhya. By now a new spirit of militant communalism, flamed by the idea of reinstalling Rama to his 'rightful birthplace' and thus starting a new, glorious era in India's history, was surging through important parts of the Hindu population.

A movement initiated to collect bricks that would be used to rebuild the allegedly destroyed temple, caught the imagination of both the Hindu right and the NRIs (non-resident Indians) who sent funds to help with the project. The bricks, known as *Ram Shilas*, were produced in thousands of villages across India. They were crafted out of local clay and brought to temples where they were washed with cow's milk and further consecrated through being wrapped in saffron cloth, prayed over for several days and blessed by *pujaris* and village elders.⁸⁵ The *Ram Shilas* were then collected by members of both the VHP and the RSS and carried in raucous processions toward Ayodhya. In return, soil was collected from 'Rama's birth place' and dispersed in the villages throughout the nation. Chandhoke notes:

almost 200,000 villages sent bricks, 300,000 pujas of the Ram Shilas were performed and altogether about 100 million people attended the various processions that carried the bricks to and from Ayodhya. . . Ritualized symbolism was to leave a trail of riots, bloodshed, mayhem, intensification of tension and hostility. . .⁸⁶

⁸² Chandhoke "The Tragedy of Ayodhya."

⁸³ Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 81.

⁸⁴ Chandhoke "The Tragedy of Ayodhya."

⁸⁵ Chanchreek and Prasad, *Crisis in India*, 11.

⁸⁶ Chanchreek and Prasad, ed. *Crisis in India*, 287.

To add to the tension, in 1990, L.K Advani, a preeminent leader of the BJP, embarked on a historic journey. Publicly associating himself with the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal, he organized a *Rath Yatra* to leave from Somanth to travel to Ayodhya. Somanth is another politically sensitive area, known in the Hindu imagination as the site of an ancient Shiva temple which was repeatedly destroyed by marauding Muslims in 1026.⁸⁷ Advani's journey would cover over one thousand kilometers. Advani hired a Muslim driver and invited a Muslim to ride with him, and the first leg of the journey, which attracted huge crowds, was relatively peaceful until the procession reached New Delhi three weeks later. From here on armed troops lined the processional routes. Advani was arrested in Bihar, but thousands of *sadhus*, holy men, *kar sevaks*,⁸⁸ *Hindu Ram Bhaktas*,⁸⁹ VHP, BJP, Bajrang Dal and RSS members reached Ayodhya where they entered the mosque and caused some damage. V.P. Singh's government, committed to protecting minority rights, opened fire. Hundreds were killed.⁹⁰ His actions were condemned and Singh resigned. When the Congress Party was once again elected, they stalled on the Ayodhya issue and impatient 'liberators,' a mob of ten thousand revivalists from all over the country, descended on Ayodhya on December 6, 1992 and demolished the Babri Masjid leaving a nation to battle in the wake of its destruction.⁹¹ This event, according to many, "dealt a mortal blow to a long-nurtured culture that has so often been described as a 'way of life.'⁹² The violence and bloodshed of Ayodhya and its riotous aftermath rocked the nation, forever shifting the dream of a pluralist, secular society living peacefully together in harmony and destroying it. The milk poured on those bricks destined for Rama's temple was tinged with animosity and blood thirst.

India's docile cow unknowingly played a huge role in promoting violence against Muslim co-inhabitants through riots occasionally started by mere rumors that one of her

⁸⁷ This is one version of the story. Renowned historian Romila Thapar proceeded to recite some alternatives from, Jain, Sanskrit and Persian sources. Seminar: University of Victoria, October, 2003.

⁸⁸ This literally translates as one who does service though work, but in the Babri Masjid context, it refers to agitators intent on building the Ram temple.

⁸⁹ Ram devotees

⁹⁰ Chanchreek and Prasad, ed. *Crisis in India*, 12.

⁹¹ The largest number of people came from Gujarat, a state which "turned to the Hindu right well before the rest of India." Radha Kumar, "India's House Divided: Understanding Communal Violence," *Foreign Affairs*, July / August 2002. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20020701fareviewessay8530/radhakumar/india-s-house-divided.html> (Oct. 10 2003).

⁹² Kothari, *Communalism in Indian Politics*, 117.

kind had been slaughtered. Today she is tainted to such a degree that creating art with her dung, which comments on the brutality and conceit of fundamentalism, was analytically a fitting, timely, provocative and profound move. Gowda's art, her bricks in *Mortar Line* in particular, may not have intentionally functioned to remind the viewer how the bricks destined for Rama's new temple were washed in milk, how Ayodhya is situated in India's cow belt where tension over the cow has been brewing for decades and has fueled the rise, and eventual victory, of a right wing government, but the material is by default inscribed with this aspect of the cow's history. Not only do Gowda's cow-dung paintings appear to comment on Ayodhya and its violent aftermath, they also point towards the cow as a polemicist; she is increasingly being transformed from an icon symbolizing the generous goddess of plenty, to one invested with a radical, separatist Hindu dogma - - a wandering, ticking time bomb.

The Cow as Political Instrument

The BJP has been in power since 1998 and their strength has in part been derived from their alliance with the VHP who in the early 1990s mobilized funding and people for the BJP campaign.⁹³ In 1999, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) made headlines when it declared its intention to "strip the . . . tiger" of its status as a national animal and bestow that honour upon the sacred cow.⁹⁴ This was another bold move intended not only to flaunt its disregard for India's diverse population, of which 12.1% are Muslim and approximately 6% are Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains, and to further intimidate the minorities with inflammatory rhetoric, but also to garner votes for the next election.⁹⁵ To add to its demand, VHP leaders also called for the closure of mechanized abattoirs and a ban on beef exports, a call that today has been taken up with earnestness by the BJP. The VHP, who were "confident of roping in various social and religious groups. . . to build a mass movement," proclaimed: "No Hindu can dare to oppose our demand to save [sic] cow."⁹⁶

⁹³ Amrita Basu, "The dialectics of Hindu nationalism," 184.

⁹⁴ Sharad Gupta, "VHP wants cow as national animal," *Indian Express Newspapers* (Bombay) Ltd., Dec. 15, 1999, <http://www.indianexpress.com/ie/daily/19991216/ifr16043.html>

⁹⁵ Figures derived from the 1991 national census. Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 56.

⁹⁶ Gupta, "VHP wants cow as national animal"

Indeed four years later, the threat has “cowed authorities into submission.”⁹⁷ It also distresses the general population, which sees its secular constitution being undermined, and it instills fear into both Muslim and Hindu minority communities. In September 2003, the National Cattle Commission (NCC) submitted its 1500 page report to the BJP government. The government had moved quickly on the issue in response to a Hindu high priest who vowed to fast to death over the neglect of India’s cows, and after the Prime minister was accused of eating beef. This allegation was hurled at Atal Vajpayee by the secularist Congress party. Congress, badly in need of votes, had also moved on cow protection issues by proposing a nationwide banning of on cow slaughter.⁹⁸ A few months later, in March 2003, youth Congress members carrying banners proclaiming “*Gau hamari mata hai, Atal Behari khata hai*” (the cow is our mother, Atal eats her) were displayed in order to sway public support away from the BJP.⁹⁹ Of course Vajpayee vehemently denied the allegations declaring he would rather die than eat beef.¹⁰⁰

In the NCC report, guidelines on how to further protect the cow are defined and drafts have been set up for proposing a nationwide ban on cow slaughter. Presently killing cows is prohibited in some northern states belonging to India’s so called cow-belt, and only Kerala, West Bengal and the “seven northeastern states,” Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalia, Arunchal Pradesh and Sikkim still have legalized cow slaughter.¹⁰¹ Proposals outlined in the documents include: a prevention of terrorism act (POTA) which would allow officials to detain gangs who smuggle cows and penalize those caught cross breeding species with imported cattle; a call to abandon tractors for bullocks by scrapping the subsidy on farm implements; advertising the Mughal emperors’ decrees which banned cow slaughter in order to appease Jains and Brahmins; and establishing *panchagavya* therapy, the use of cow by-products for therapeutic purposes.

Today a veritable industry endorsed by the BJP government has grown around the medicinal uses of cow by-products. To this end, scientists at the Centre for Medicinal

⁹⁷ Tarun Chopra, *The Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Prakash Book Depot, 2000), 13

⁹⁸ Jyotsna Singh, “India targets cow slaughter,” *BBC News South Asia*, August 11, 2003. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2945020stm. (10 Oct 2003)

⁹⁹ Bhavdeep Kang, “How Now, Brown Cow? The Political Class is in a Holier-than -thou Debate over a Mute Creature,” AFMI, USA and Canada American Federation of Muslims of Indian Origin. 10.2. (September / October, 2003). <http://www.afmi.org/news.html> (26 Oct 2003)

¹⁰⁰ Singh, “India targets cow slaughter,” *BBC News South Asia*, August 11, 2003.

¹⁰¹ Singh, “India targets cow slaughter” *BBC News South Asia*, August 11, 2003.

Plants in Lucknow distilled cow's urine and announced that it "enhances the effects of any medicine."¹⁰² Cow's urine, also known as *go-mutra*, has not only been traditionally valued by women who consumed it before and after childbirth,¹⁰³ it is also mentioned in the ancient treatises of the Ayurveda.¹⁰⁴ *Five Specialized Therapies of Ayurveda (Pancakarma)* discusses how, depending on their condition, patients should be treated with cow's urine.¹⁰⁵ Washing in cow's urine is considered beneficial as it is a potent purifier, and sick children are often bathed in the sacred fluid.¹⁰⁶ Often the most immediate way to access the precious liquid is by cupping the hands underneath a urinating cow.

Today cow's urine is sold packaged in convenient bottles through a program instigated by the Gujarati VHP. Launched as a health cure under the label "Gift of the Cow," it is selling like hot cakes. Advertised as "sterilised and completely fresh," Julian West reports a bottle costs about twenty rupees and may be purchased at VHP run centers in Gujarat, at outlets in Madhya Pradesh, or at religious fairs and festivals throughout India.¹⁰⁷ Scientists working under the BJP government are researching *go-mutra*'s benefits, but claims that it promotes health and prevents skin ailments, obesity, kidney and liver diseases, as well as cancer, have made it such a popular item, demand is outstripping supply. The urine is collected at about 600 VHP run cattle shelters throughout Gujarat, and mixed with herbs, it is also available in tablet form or as a cream.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² Singh, "India targets cow slaughter" *BBC News South Asia*, August 11, 2003

¹⁰³ Lest the squeamish protest, *Premarine*, a post hormonal replacement drug derived from mare's urine, is consumed by millions of women world wide, particularly in the western world, without the bat of an eye, and the lives of mares who spend years subjected to forced pregnancies and trapped in stalls lest a precious drop of urine be lost, are never considered in this multibillion dollar industry.

¹⁰⁴ Radha Kalyanaraman, "Sacred Cows." Mindatlas.com http://www.healthkids.net/course.phtml?course_id=564 (10 Oct. 2003).

A.L. Basham describes the Ayurveda as the "traditional Indian medicine" known as the "science of longevity, which aims to restore a balance to the human body through a variety of naturally based therapies." A.L. Basham, *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 115.

¹⁰⁵ Vaidya Bhagwan Dash and Vaidya Lalitesh Kashyap, *Five Specialized Therapies of Ayurveda (Pancakarma)* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1992), 333-335.

¹⁰⁶ Christine Graham, "Holy Cow."

http://www.moreinfo.com.au/avs/newsveg/holycow_433.html, (17 Feb. 2002).

¹⁰⁷ Julian West, "A gift from the gods – bottled cow's urine." *Telegraph Group Limited*, 2001.<http://pub18ezboard.com/fbalsanfrm59.showMessage?topicID=81.topic> (17 Feb. 2002).

¹⁰⁸ West, "A gift from the gods – bottled cow's urine." *Telegraph Group Limited*.

The Gujarati government hopes the Indian Institute of Management will set up a database featuring traditional cures and will validate their findings.¹⁰⁹ Although indigenous medicines also recommend dust baths from dirt found in the hooves or footprints of cows, *go-pada*, which is collected and sprinkled upon the ailing person, so far this product has not been promoted, however, the additional insights gleaned about the cow's various gifts has helped to further strengthen cow protection and have added fuel to the Hindu Nationalist rhetoric.

In spite of the cow symbolizing wealth and prosperity, and functioning as a wandering apothecary, as well as a mobile food and fuel stall, proposing a ban on cow-slaughter not only contradicts the secular vision of the constitution, it also blatantly disregards minority dietary habits and effectively renders Muslims, Christians as well as many Hindus, invisible. It also carries within it the notion that all Muslims are beef eaters, notes Kang, who feels this could not be further from the truth. He asserts that in Muslim dominated Kashmir "no-one eats beef . . . [and that] in the cow belt . . . cow meat is banned [so] prosperous Muslims [there] eat mutton."¹¹⁰ VHP's Ggiraj Kishore's recent call to Muslims to refrain from eating beef so that the two communities could live peacefully together, not only puts the sole responsibility of communal harmony on Muslim shoulders, but defines the issue as riding on the back of a cow. Kandasamy chides, that not only is this idea amongst others "udderly fanatic," but the cow has become a "tool for political exhortation" and is being used as a "veritable weapon in the hands of Hindu chauvinistic and fundamentalist groups."¹¹¹ Muslims are not the only victims; a ban on cow-slaughter would also affect marginalized Hindus such as the *Dalit*.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ West, "A gift from the gods – bottled cow's urine." *Telegraph Group Limited*.

Fantastic claims about cow by products are circulating on internet sites. They range from: the copper in cow's urine transforming into gold within the patient's body and thus enhancing its immunity, the Japanese using cow dung to protect them from atomic emissions and fresh cow-dung killing both Malaria and T.B. germs, the latter investigated by Italian scientist Prof. Bea God. From "Virtues of the Cow." <http://www.love4cow.com/virtues.htm> (10 Nov. 2003).

¹¹⁰ Kang, "How Now, Brown Cow?" Kang also claims that in Kerala, most Hindus, with the exception of Brahmins, eat beef. It is cheaper than mutton.

¹¹¹ Kandasamy, Meena. "Udderly Fanatic," *Boloji.com*, (10 Nov. 2003) <http://www.boloji.com/analysis/053.htm>

¹¹² I am not promoting meat eating or animal slaughter— personally I think the world would be a better place containing more forests and food producing fields and less aggression if we refrained from eating four legged animals, but I am also aware that many of India's cows struggle for survival, especially in the

In troubled times when food is scarce, poor members of Dalit and tribal communities in Andhra Pradesh pool their money and collectively buy an old and sick cow. Infirm cows are sold cheaply and the subsequent sharing of beef ensures survival for another couple of weeks.¹¹³ The proposed ban would sorely affect the lives of those who only out of need resort to such drastic measures as consuming sick animals. The Dalit are a socially underprivileged community who work in the leather industry and keep villages clean and disease free by removing carcasses; in the former institutionalization of the caste system, they were deemed untouchable and were relegated to an existence outside the caste system.¹¹⁴ Although meat was a readily available food source for this community and many consumed carrion meat, the “concern with ritual purity and pollution, social status and the sacred cow concept [led] many groups to abandon beef eating.”¹¹⁵ Those who collectively purchase and consume old cows may still be concerned with their social status, but their survival is more important than status. However, having the option of consuming beef may soon be a thing of the past as more disadvantaged and poor people fear for their lives in a nation state where the cow’s life is worth more than a human’s.

This shocking reality was brought home in late October 2002 through the brutal killing of five Dalits, who were allegedly found skinning a live cow in Haryana, two hours drive north of Delhi.¹¹⁶ According to the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian Weekly*, reports not only about the status of the cow’s lifelessness, but about police involvement were contradictory; some reporters confirm Dalits were killed by an angry mob of militant Hindus and police were either involved, or chose not to intercede; others contend police killed one of the Dalit and “then asked for help from local Hindu

city where I have seen them rummaging through garbage in search of food. Also I am sure many of the claims made for the sacred cow could also be made for the hardy water buffalo who is mother and provider to millions of Indians, yet her protection isn’t being proposed.

¹¹³ Kancha Ilaiah, “Cow, Buffalo and Nationalism,” *Deccan Herald News*, Friday September 26, 2003. <http://www.deccanherald.com/deccanherald/sep26/top.asp> (10 Oct. 2003)

¹¹⁴ Bruno Philip, “Caste Crime,” (Le Monde) *Guardian Weekly*, January 30-February 5th 2003, p. 17.

¹¹⁵ Simoons, Frederick J. “Questions in the Sacred Cow Controversy.” *Current Anthropology*. 20. 3. September 1979: 470.

¹¹⁶ John Lancaster, “In Rumor of Cow’s Death, a Reason to Kill. Hindu Lynching of 5 Rekindles National Debate in India Over Faith and Culture,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2002, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/as2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentID=A3253.html>

extremists . . . in finishing them off.”¹¹⁷ Corruption is a wide spread problem in India and families of the victims allege their hard working sons were driving to market with a load of about 200 cowhides when they were stopped by police. Refusing to pay a bribe, they were beaten up, one to death, and the rest were taken to the police station where the story of the live cow being skinned was concocted by police eager to cover up their heinous deed. A mob of thousands, incensed by what they heard, converged on the police station, pulled the men out and beat them to death for killing a cow.¹¹⁸ The victims were handed over naked, yet money was invested for an autopsy - on the cow. VHP senior vice president Giriraj Kishore, citing the Hindu scriptures at a news conference in Delhi declared “the life of a cow is more precious than a man’s.”¹¹⁹ This caused uproar. Local VHP members demanded the mob not be persecuted for its actions and even organized a congratulatory procession for the participants in the aftermath of the slaughter. Dalit activist Udit Raj accuses the “whole Hindu religious system [as] the culprit.”¹²⁰

The incident has created deep fissures within Indian society, scars that Sheela Gowda inscribes into her paintings, and ones that will not readily heal. Secular liberals see the event as further proof of right wing extremists willing to undermine the law to promote a nationalist agenda. The Dalits stand once again accused, wretchedly powerless as the almighty cow is hailed as *gomata*, the mother, and they are relegated to the outskirts of a battle, looking in from the rim, with not only law enforcement, but also a privileged elite against them.

¹¹⁷ Philip, “Caste Crime,” *Guardian Weekly*, p. 17.

¹¹⁸ Others report that the Dalits stopped their vehicle when they saw a cow, or a cow carcass, and were skinning it when a crowd of about fifty celebrants returning from a religious festival (*Dussehra*, a ten day festival which culminates in burning an effigy of King Ravana, who was killed by Rama, the hero of the Ramayana) discovered them working close to the construction site of a new temple; they attacked the men and afterwards brought them half dead to the police station where they demanded they be charged for killing a cow. The police filed a complaint, but the furious crowd which had now increased in size and was not willing to be placated, hurled bricks and broke into the station, thus gaining access to the men and brutally beating and burning them to death within the presence of “several dozen policemen” (Lancaster, “In Rumor of Cow’s Death. . .” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2002.

Even though these gruesome killings are shocking, what is equally frightening is the response from the authorities and the militant right. The police did not arrange for a vehicle or an ambulance to return the mutilated bodies of the victims to the families, and a shocked and grieving brother noted they did not even deem it worthy to cover the bodies with a sheet. Meena Kandasamy, “Udderly Fanatic,” *Boloji.com* November, 10, 2003. <http://www.boloji.com/analysis/053.htm>

¹¹⁹ Bruno Philip, “Caste Crimes,” *Guardian Weekly*, January 30-February 5th 2003, p. 17.

¹²⁰ Lancaster, “In Rumor of Cow’s Death. . .” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2002.

Among Muslims a group of women acting as a bridging element between communities divided, found a poignant way to placate and reassure their fellow Hindus that they are willing to accommodate the majority faith. In March 2003, after Madhya Pradesh witnessed communal violence over a Muslim killing a cow, and Hindus retaliated by burning 131 Muslim owned shops, about two-dozen Muslim women took to the streets carrying Hindu style offerings such as kumkum and “lighted earthen lamps on plates.”¹²¹ They were on their way to worship cows. After the ritual was completed the cows were fed sweets and delicacies the women had especially prepared for them. Responding to queries, one of the Muslim women involved noted: “people belonging to all religions dr[i]nk milk from the animals and hence everyone should revere them.”¹²² The women, who had been accompanied by a few Hindu women, were publicly praised for their show of communal solidarity, but the incident points to the increasing fear these people have for their lives. How many concessions are they expected to make to prove that they want to live amicably in a country many of their ancestors have inhabited for over one thousand years?

Godhra and its Aftermath

The innocent cow wanders provocatively, an ever-present cultural reminder of her central position in the Hindu / Muslim conflict and the Hindutva debate. The above-mentioned incidents, the Hindutva rhetoric and the violent and deadly outbursts have citizens concerned and intellectuals, historians, artists and cultural activists worried. How can the violence be stopped? After Ayodhya and the riots triggered by that event, India was relatively quiet. Radical organizations had temporarily been banned but the political move toward the right was increasing nationwide, and in 1998, the BJP was voted into power.

On February 27, 2002, another shocking event shook the nation, which has artists scrambling to find appropriate language to comment on and make meaning of these

¹²¹ “MP Muslim women worship cows to show communal solidarity,” Indo-Asian News Service, March 11, 2003. http://hindustantimes.com/news/181_158998,000900010009.htm (3 Oct 2003)

¹²² “MP Muslim women worship cows. . .” Indo-Asian News Service, March 11, 2003.

horrific events.¹²³ It occurred in Gujarat, a state which embraced the Hindu right well before the rest of the nation and where the BJP has been in power since 1995. With the sanction of their Gujarati state minister Narendra Modi who offered full support to Ayodhya's revival, a number of Gujarati Hindu activists arrived at the erstwhile site of the Babri mosque intent on building their temple to Ram. They were hindered in their efforts by the central government, which had dispatched over 2500 troops.¹²⁴ As the thwarted revivalists, pilgrims, activists, women, children and *kar sevaks* were returning to Gujarat, their train was torched by a Muslim mob and over 55 Hindus died in the attack.

An official inquiry into the Godhra train incident claims that Pakistan and global powers intent on thwarting India's emergence as a super power could conceivably hatch conspiracies to destabilize and weaken the Indian state.¹²⁵ The report, which purposely uses provocative language, concludes it was "the intention of the mob . . . to put to death all the pilgrims travelling by the Sabharmati Express."¹²⁶ The report not only claims that the Pakistani government was involved but that local Congressmen were active participants. This linking suggests Congress and Pakistan as co-conspirators intent on nurturing communal disharmony.

Families who lost loved ones when carriages of the Sabharmati Express were ignited, wonder why members of the BJP, who promised to return the Ayodhya pilgrims safely, did not accompany them, but instead booked their tickets on a train leaving two days later. Neither accusing the BJP, nor Muslims for the terrible immolation of the passengers, they nonetheless feel they have been used as political pawns; in their confusion, grief and uncertainty they can only blame anti-social elements intent on disturbing the peace in Gujarat.¹²⁷ The victims' families, who had been staunch

¹²³ Sheela Gowda, Personal Correspondence, 17 Nov. 2003.

¹²⁴ Radha Kumar, "India's House Divided: Understanding Communal Violence," *Foreign Affairs*. July / August 2002. <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20020701fareviewessay8530/radhakumar/india-s-house-divided.html> (10 Oct. 2003).

¹²⁵ This field study was conducted by Justice S. S. Tewatia, Dr. Krishna Singh Arya, Prof. K.K. Kuthiala, to name a few, and posted on the internet. D.S. Tewatia et al. "Facts speak for themselves," Delhi: Council for International Affairs and Human Rights, http://www.geocities.com/hsitah9facts_speak_for_themselves.htm (29 Nov 2004)

¹²⁶ D.S. Tewatia et al. "Facts speak for themselves."

¹²⁷ Syed Firdaus Ashraf, "Godhra victims allege BJP 'pressure,'" Oct, 5, 2003, <http://www.redif.com/news/2003/oct/05godh.htm> (15 Nov 2003).

supporters of the VHP, BJP and Bajrang Dal, urged the public not to take part in the VHP's forthcoming Ayodhya yatra.¹²⁸

The retaliation following the horrific train attack was swift and brutal. Like those travelling in that doomed train, Muslim victims were roasted alive and in the ensuing riots over 1000 Muslims lost their lives. The Gujarati government did little to quell the violence; in fact "police officers who did turn back the mobs" were transferred out.¹²⁹ Gujarati's chief minister Narendra Modi is a member of the militant RSS which believes "Muslims and other minority groups must remain subservient to the Hindu majority."¹³⁰ After the carnage, the government coalition repeatedly called on Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to ask Modi to step down.¹³¹ Vajpayee ignored them and he only deemed it necessary to visit Godhra after the National Human Rights Commission condemned the Gujarati government for seriously violating "fundamental rights enshrined [in its secular constitution] guaranteeing life, liberty, equality and dignity for all citizens," and further accused the Gujarati government of no minor charge: ethnic cleansing.¹³² The terrible incident had India's population reeling, but what stunned people even more was Modi's re-election. By voting in the man and the party responsible for the post Godhra insurgences, the Gujarati population has effectively approved of the terrible atrocities committed by its government.

Some see the inflammatory rhetoric used to stir up the population orchestrated and managed by a clever and 'educated' group of people, and in fact the arguments used are common ones applied world wide by right wing regimes intent on holding on to power.¹³³ Typically, minorities are made into familiar scapegoats. They are blamed for: the general demise of the economy; unemployment; the loss of jobs; lack of housing; poverty; unrest and strife. Conspiratorial worldviews, espoused for example by the Field

¹²⁸ A procession

¹²⁹ Kumar, "India's House Divided. . ."

¹³⁰ Ranjit Devraj, "Gujarat hits at India's secular heart," *Asia Times*. April 6, 2002. <http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/DD06Df01.html> (16 Sep 2003)

¹³¹ "In terms of parliamentary seats, the BJP eclipsed the Congress as the largest party of India in the 1996, 1998 and 1999 elections. In March 1998, it came to power, though in a coalition of 18 parties, and again in October 1999 in a preelection coalition of 24 parties. It had to develop a broad-based alliance with many parties, most of which did not subscribe to the ideology of Hindu nationalism." Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life*, 72.

¹³² Devraj, quoting A. K. Varma, chairman of the NHRC, in "Gujarat hits at India's secular heart,"

¹³³ Sheela Gowda, Personal Correspondence, 17 Nov, 2003

Study on Godhra, essentialize and demonize the other and among the local / nationalistic issues verbalized, an unspoken undercurrent of racism, sexism and heterosexism runs parallel to the voiced rhetoric.¹³⁴ Looking for immediate gratification (votes), real issues such as the effects of globalization and a world economy run by only a few of the powerful elite, are not addressed. Once unwanted elements¹³⁵ are removed, the country, be it Germany, Austria, the USA or India is promised to be restored to its former glory.¹³⁶

Congress failed to “establish a basis for Indian nationhood free from the imperilling residue of the historic communalism that had evolved in a complex and diverse continent,” and government support for Gandhi’s “vaguely articulated dream of rediscovering actual communities and making them the basis of a revitalized, moral and free India,” is a thing of the past.¹³⁷ Today Prime Minister Vajpayee calls for Hindutva, a land of the Hindus for the Hindus alone. To this end short term strategies employed by government include “ending the Muslim personal law, cow slaughter, parochial schools, and affirmative action for backward and scheduled classes.”¹³⁸ The long-term goal is to create Hindutva either by conversions or through ousting other historical, religious and cultural points of view. Part of this agenda is: the rewriting of history textbooks to suit the Hindutva vision;¹³⁹ the vicious internet attacks and petitions launched by Indians of the diaspora against historian Romila Thapar who is attempting to expose the Hindutva

¹³⁴ D.S. Tewatia et al. “Facts speak for themselves,” Delhi: Council for International Affairs and Human Rights, http://www.geocities.com/hsitah9facts_speak_for_themselves.htm (29 Nov 2004)

Racism in the form of caste politics, clearly demonstrated by the death of the Dalits through Hindu fanatics and in the communal riots; sexism in the way women are obliged to adhere to traditional roles wherein the husband is worshipped as a god; heterosexism clearly evident in the outcry by women of the Shiv Sena movement caused by the screening of Indo-Canadian film maker Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*. The moral outburst centered on the lesbian content shown in the context of a traditional middle class family. The far right claimed lesbian sexuality alien to Indian culture. Protestors were further incensed because Mehta named the lovers Sita and Radha.

¹³⁵ Recent unwanted elements in history have been Jews, immigrants, Muslims, or terrorists.

¹³⁶ For example Austria’s erstwhile leader of the far right Freedom Party, Joerg Haider, with his strong anti-immigration opinions and his essentialist comments, kindled hostility toward minorities as well as instability in Austria in the late 1990s.

¹³⁷ Stein, *A History of India*, 408.

¹³⁸ Ali M.M. “Under BJP Government, An Intolerant Face of Hindu India Emerging Unabashedly Into World View.” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. October / November, 1998. <http://www.washington-report.org/backissues/1098/9810059.html> (19 Sep 2002)

Minorities were granted constitutional protection of their rights when the constitution was drafted and Muslims have the right to uphold personal law, also known as Shariat. Rules and regulations governing the lives of Muslims are derived from the Qu’ran.

¹³⁹ Romila Thapar. “Politics and the Indian Past: The Future of History in India,” Lecture, Victoria: University of Victoria, Oct 2, 2003.

construction of India's history; the refusal to print such books as D.N. Jha's: *The Myth of the Holy Cow* which proposes that ancient Hindus consumed cow meat; and the harassment of cultural activists such as Mallika Sarabia, a Gujarati dancer who was helping victims of the post-Godhra riots.¹⁴⁰ To this end, artist's work is often deliberately misinterpreted and fabricated charges laid against them.¹⁴¹

Some Indian artists working today choose not incorporate Hindu icons as symbols in their artistic practice in order to make it absolutely clear that they are not associated with Hindutva anti-pluralist policies being promoted in their country. Instead as mentioned previously, Nalini Malini for example will refer back to Mahatma Gandhi in her art making by referencing the salt march, or as in Atul Dodiya's case, Gandhi himself is prominently featured in his artwork in an attempt to re-ignite ideas of tolerance, democracy and secularism.¹⁴² But Gandhi's iconic power is also used by the BJP.

In order to justify the increased violence in Indian society and to subvert history, the Government of India's department of Information and Broadcasting recently took out an advertisement pronouncing Gandhi's call to arms.¹⁴³ On August 11, 1920 Gandhi had written "The Doctrine of the Sword," in which he was promoting non-violent, non-cooperation, yet he also mentioned in this article that he "would rather have India resort

¹⁴⁰ Gowda, Personal Correspondence, 17 Nov, 2003.

¹⁴¹ Gowda, Personal Correspondence, 17 Nov, 2003. M.F. Husain, India's most renowned artist, was charged with disturbing communal harmony when he painted nude portraits of Hindu goddesses in 1996. BJP officials also demanded a painting be removed before an exhibition opened at the country's premier contemporary art gallery, the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in New Delhi in September, 2000. The offensive painting by Surendran Nair, *An actor rehearsing the interior monologue of Icarus*, depicted the Greek mythological figure Icarus naked on top of an Ashoka Pillar. The exhibition "Combine—Voice for the New Century" was scheduled to open in September, but "outraged over this blatant attack on artistic freedom, all the artists involved . . . withdrew their works in protest." "BJP-led government censors painting at India's National Gallery of Modern Art." *World Socialist Website*, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/oct2000/art-o09.shtml> (4 March 2004). Another artist, film director Deepa Mehta, has been hindered in making her third film *Water* in a trilogy entitled *Earth* (which is a film on partition) *Fire* (which has lesbian content) and *Water* (which was to explore "the poverty and social restrictions facing a group of widows at a Hindu temple in the 1930s." (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/apr2001/dmeh-a10.shtml>) (3 June 2001). Films by Anand Pathwardan who has been making political and social documentaries, have been banned by successive governments from being aired on television (<http://mumbai.indymedia.org/en/2004/01/208970.shtml>) (March 4, 2004)

¹⁴² Seen in *Secular Practice, Recent Art from India*, an exhibition in Vancouver, February 2002.

Dodiya even prefers to call the city Bombay, rather than adopt Mumbai as the city's name, not because he is promoting or pining for the period of British colonization, but rather because he feels strongly about the current political state of affairs and does not want to conform to name changes pushed by the Hindu right. Atul Dodiya, In conversation, Victoria: February 2002.

¹⁴³ Sheela Gowda wrote informing me of this troubling recent development. Personal Correspondence, 17 Nov, 2003.

to arms in order to defend her honour. . . than remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour.”¹⁴⁴ His next sentence qualified the previous one by stating, “But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence.”¹⁴⁵ His statement was of course directed at British colonialism in India. The previous quote, advertised through an official agency and taken out of context, severely distorts Gandhi’s message. It is another attempt by the government at rewriting history to suit its own purposes, a concept that has historian Romila Thapar worried about the nation’s children because textbook “history is being revised with a vengeance.”¹⁴⁶ It also has millions of Indians, numerous artists and activists, worried.

Artists’ response

Today many artists are attempting to express what they perceive occurring beneath the nation’s political map in forms accessible to the majority of the population, through dance, performance, theatre, sculpture, poetry, painting, writing, photography, printmaking or installation work. Christoph Storz, an artist and Gowda’s husband, echoes the concern many are feeling when he says fundamentalists are trying to “engineer a correct Indian history . . . [and] are trying to formalise the past as a single ‘intact’ culture. They think of ‘Indian’ from a united majority Hindu point of view.”¹⁴⁷ Gowda reflects on how artists are responding to fundamentalism through revising their visual language. She augments his statement with:

Rising fundamentalism is, I feel, the most important explanation for such a sudden change in the Indian art scene in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, in terms of media shifting from painting and sculpture to more experimental ones. We are questioning what is tradition and what is modernity. And again, neither Indian culture nor Western culture is monolithic. . . .
Contemporary art in India is in its content and form specific to its national

¹⁴⁴ Mohandas Gandhi, *Young India*, Vol. 21 (July–November, 1920). (Sent along with Gowda’s letter, Nov. 17, 2003).

¹⁴⁵ Gandhi, *Young India*, Vol. 21.

¹⁴⁶ Romila Thapar. “Politics and the Indian Past: The Future of History in India.” Lecture, Victoria: University of Victoria, Oct 2, 2003.

¹⁴⁷ Sarah Campbell and Grant Watson, eds. *Drawing Space: Contemporary Indian Drawing: Sheela Gowda, N.S. Harsha, Nasreen Mohamedi* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2000) 60. This concern is echoed by many scholars and historians such as Romila Thapar “Politics and the Indian Past: The Future of History in India.” Lecture, Victoria: University of Victoria, Oct 2, 2003.

context.¹⁴⁸

In light of India's political reality, artists who are concerned with the political changes to their country are endeavouring to develop artistic languages which will stir the Hindu imagination and feed into people's strengths, instead of plying on their weakness or fear, yet to avoid censorship the message needs to be subtle. The language cannot employ the same crude fear-mongering tactics used by right wing extremists, for this would undermine the very basis of their intent which seeks to restore strength and inculcate a version of India's history closer to the truth than that currently being propagated. Some artists, aiming to locate appropriate image related languages to voice socio-political concerns, appear on the defensive, their artistic voices silenced, drowned in their own correctness.¹⁴⁹ They are seeking visual languages that will not only move beyond expressing the anguish they feel when considering India and its future, but will engage the viewer rather than turn them into a voyeur.¹⁵⁰

Back in 1993, after Ayodhya and its terrible aftermath, over sixty artists lobbied together to create an exhibition called *Wounds*, which was organized by CIMA, the *Centre of International Modern Art* in Calcutta.¹⁵¹ It opened on February 27, 1993. Among those responding to the theme 'wounds,' a word which, K.L. Kaul notes "opens out its entire inner core to metaphoric suggestions signifying wrenching and mortifying experiences of the human soul in a breathtaking range,"¹⁵² and an apt choice of title to stimulate artists to voice their inconsolable shock at the recent carnage, were some of India's most famous contemporary artists: M.F. Husain, Arpita Singh, Nalini Malani, Meera Mukherjee, Frances Newton Souza, Tyeb Mehta, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Gogi Saroj Pal, and Manjit Bawa and to name just a few. Wasim Kapoor, one of the artists who contributed to the exhibition wrote: "the artist feels impelled to react. He cannot write; he has nothing but his painting and he has to contribute."¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Campbell and Watson, *Drawing Space*, 60.

¹⁴⁹ Sheela Gowda, Personal Correspondence, 17 Nov., 2003.

¹⁵⁰ Gowda, Personal Correspondence, 17 Nov. 2003

¹⁵¹ This exhibition was sponsored by Tata Steel.

¹⁵² K.L. Kaul, "Depicting the trauma of our times," *The Statesman*, Delhi: March 25, 1993, in *Wounds*, (Press Review Catalogue accompanying the exhibition), Calcutta: CIMA, 1993. (no page numbers).

¹⁵³ Anuradha Roy, *Wounds* (Press Review Catalogue accompanying the exhibition) Calcutta: CIMA, 1993.

The artists reacting to the criminal violence, land-grabbing, extortion, public gang rape¹⁵⁴ and senseless deaths triggered by the mosque's destruction voiced their condemnation in written statements, and through making art.¹⁵⁵ They needed to take a stance and express their dismay at the tragic deaths, and at the pain and suffering inflicted upon fellow citizens because of ideological and religious differences. Many felt a need to respond to the rise in Hindu fundamentalism and the increased presence of right wing Hindu factions represented in political parties who were, and are, progressively blurring the lines between religion and state and are threatening the very idea of secularism.

Although Gowda did not participate in *Wounds*, she was exploring the wounds around her at this time (1992-3) with her cow-dung paintings, which incorporate thorns and depict open incisions in human forms, as well as fragmented body parts (figures 59, 61-63, 65, 68-70). Later works, such as *8769 Miles and an Inch* (figures 56 & 57) reveal deep fissures gouged into the landscape type surface of the painting evoking memories of India as a land of the sacred with the anointed kumkum dots, but also as a land forever divided by that arbitrary "inch," the barrier of Pakistan and India and by regionalism.

Anjolie Ela Menon reacted to the rise in communal rhetoric and the events of Ayodhya by painting *Sisters* "two women - a Muslim and a Hindu - joined in anguish."¹⁵⁶ Their hollow eyes gaze accusingly at the viewer. Husain, an artist of Muslim background, painted Queen Maya giving birth to the Buddha of peace in his abstracted angular style. Manjit Bawa adopted the symbol of a cow to express his reaction to the trauma. Its profile looks out to the left and it is crossed by another animal resembling a lion, who, turned in the opposite direction, reveals a vicious open mouth and sharp teeth. Between the necks of these two animals a man, his hair flaming around him like the aura of a sun, (Bawa's self-portrait) gazes out at the viewer. Writer Arun Ghosh notes that with "Bawa's deliberately limited palette" and his "idiosyncratic style. . . a peaceful cow . . . metamorphosed into a man-eater with bared fang."¹⁵⁷ Ghosh interprets this painting as the artist "possibly . . . want[ing] the viewers to realise that even such a peace-loving

¹⁵⁴ Sohini Sen, "Blood from the Eyes," *The Telegraph Magazine*, February 29, 1993, in *Wounds* (Press Review Catalogue accompanying the exhibition), Calcutta: CIMA, 1993.

¹⁵⁵ K.L. Chanchreek and Saroj Prasad, ed. *Crisis in India* (Delhi: H.K. Publishers & Distributors, 1993) 24.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Bartalos writing for Time Magazine in *Wounds*, Press Review Catalogue.

¹⁵⁷ Arun Ghosh, "Review of Wounds," *Wounds*, Press Review Catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Calcutta: CIMA, April 10, 1993.

person as an artist. . . may and [does] transform into a propagator of destruction in such a communal atmosphere as was witnessed recently.”¹⁵⁸

Gowda picked up a compelling and appropriate material when she chose cow-dung to comment on communalism and violence. The cow is a potent Indian icon. It has long been the symbol of a non-violent, pluralistic nation which has not only compassionately eschewed killing its “mother” in gratitude for all she gives, but has also learned to tolerate, live with, and assimilate colonizers and new ideas incorporating, for example, the Buddha into Vishnu’s ten incarnations and *ahimsa*, the Jain philosophy of non-violence, into a way of life. It is a nation which, with its open mindedness, has accepted various philosophical schools and multiple religious interpretations and expressions: naked ash covered Sadhus, third gendered Hijras, sky clad Jains, Kali and her blood thirstiness, Shiva as Ardhanarisvara, gender bending gods, Yoga, Bakhti realized devotees and self realized women, but Hinduism has also expressed a dark side with its discriminatory and racist practices manifested through the caste system and its attitude towards tribal peoples and women. Today the cow also represents communalism, political strife and abhorrent violence manifested through fanatical Hindu zealots.

¹⁵⁸ Ghosh, “Review of Wounds.”

Conclusion

The last chapter in this thesis focused on India's recent history, from the formation of the Congress Party in 1885, to partition, the rise of Hindutva, the ever-present volatile icon of the holy cow, communal riots and Ayodyha's terrible aftermath. Indian politics and the cow's central role within had to be addressed because it was the atrocities indirectly committed in her name which spurred Gowda into expressing herself through a new medium. This chapter also touched on how some of India's most famous artists reacted to the terrible surges of violence taking place in their country.

India, vibrant in its array of people, traditions, and religious practices, oscillating between acceptance and assimilation on the one hand and intolerance on the other, is a land of pluralism, contradictions and multiplicities; it refuses to be neatly defined and categorized. Artists have a rich culture to draw on, one which has given birth to the concept of and cipher for zero, to the deep philosophical or metaphysical schools of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, as well as to multiple artistic expressions which range from sophisticated approaches to dance and music, to highly developed visual languages expressed through living rock-cut and freestanding architecture, painting, the plastic arts and countless folk art traditions. Ram Rahman an organizer of Sahmat, a loose coalition of Indian artists from all disciplines states: "Our reality as artists, as a country, as a culture, is a reality of multiple identities that we seek to celebrate and reinforce. The multiple opens the dialogue. You can't define it. We feel that is much less dangerous, because the minute you start defining, you create conflict."¹

Although many politically astute and critical artists of Hindu descent shy away from using materials that resonate with one aspect of that cultural identity, their Hindu heritage, wanting to avoid at all cost any associations to fundamentalist Hindu politics, Sheela Gowda found another, more subversive way to do this. She embraced cow-dung, a controversial and 'hot' substance resonating with multiple meanings, because it could address numerous national issues at various levels in a subtle manner. Through her art she subtly invites public discourse on the dangers involved with the increased

¹ Christine Redfern. "Art confronts politics and national identity at Moving Ideas." <http://www.montrealmirror.com/old/2001/nov15/visualart1.html> (12 Feb.2002)

politicization of the cow, on marginalized women's concerns, and on what it means to be an Indian woman working in an international arena.

In making art with dung, Gowda did not reject her western-based artistic training; rather in the tradition of modernist artists who at first were seen as 'naughty boys' before they were incorporated into an obliging canon, Gowda expanded upon some of its unspoken assumptions about materials appropriate for 'high art.' Turning to cow-dung, Sheela Gowda made it her own, as she made a part of India's ignored creative work its own, thereby at the same time casting off a part of the colonial imposition of aesthetics and media, vis-à-vis which modern Indian art struggles to position itself.

Gowda had turned to working with cow-dung due to her sense of the inadequacy of 'art as usual' in the face of the increasing fundamentalist violence. The country around her was erupting in bloodshed, and countless innocent people were losing their lives in brutal onslaughts fueled by communalism. The situation was frightening.² As an artist, Gowda needed to respond to "what was happening around [her]," but painting in oil no longer seemed like a viable or suitable vehicle with which to adequately express the outrage, fear, and frustration the national crisis and its consequences provoked.³ Gowda's continuing evolution as an artist was also triggered by what she perceived of as sensuality in the nature of violence. Her previous paintings already contained masked violence, but she further investigated this theme in her cow-dung work.⁴ This is an aspect of her art which I have not explored adequately simply because it is a way of looking at violence that I cannot relate to. Gowda explained how she explored this odd convergence of the sensual in the act of violence in her work.⁵ Much of that violence would be relayed through the media, so her reactions in part must have stemmed from how the media explored and portrayed the riots and the acts of terror committed in both communities. The media loves to sensationalize and shocking images isolated from the rest of events become independently suspended, played back again and again in slow motion,

² On-line interview with Sheela Gowda conducted at the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis in 2003, where Gowda's "And Tell Him of my Pain" and "Private Gallery" were on display from February through May, 2003. <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/exhibition/>(3 June 2003)

³ On-line interview with Sheela Gowda. <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/exhibition/> (3 June 2003)

⁴ Sheela Gowda, Correspondence, 23 January 2004.

⁵ Sheela Gowda, Correspondence, 23 January 2004.

abstracted through repetition. The sensual converging with violence could also be interpreted as the body, an expression of life, beauty and vitality, being slashed, mutilated, charred or disfigured. The violence displayed in isolated and repeated images is gloated upon, consumed

In exploring cow-dung as an artistic medium and as an art language option, Gowda rejected the imperial oil paint for a indigenous and controversial material resonating with multiple meanings, thereby subtly reminding the viewer through her art of the sacred cow's long history and importance across class and gender lines in India, and highlighting the loss of original concepts and symbolism around the cow against her current status, tainted by extremist, fascist politics. As discussed, cow-dung, emanating from an animal whose category has shifted from that of a cultural icon hailed as the dispenser of sweet, endless, motherly giving and representing non-violence, purity, tolerance and generosity, to one as a political pawn, is invested with ideological agendas: it resonates with ideas connected to women, Lakshmi, caste, discrimination, status, pollution, purification, and last but not least to politics, communalism, Ayodhya and the Hindu / Muslim conflict. Gowda's insistence on intervening, attempting to reclaim the holy cow and lead her via her dung away from Hindutva and religious fundamentalism into the secular spaces of modern art galleries, I argue was a way for her to re-appropriate a powerful symbol to critique violence and communalism in a smart and non-violent way. Unlike oil paint, cow-dung with its sacred, political, women-centered connotations is India specific.

I read Sheela Gowda's paintings and installations as provocative and profound comments on the effects of fundamentalism and as a way of drawing on cow-dung for its higher resonance, in an attempt to, as Poshyananda notes: apply "cow-dung . . . as a poultice on the trauma of a nation splintered by religious factions and as a way of healing through nonviolence."⁶ Her choice of an artistic language which embraces and reconfigures indigenous materials which range from gold leaf, thread and cow-dung, itself a material in flux between ideas connoting filth and purity, and dung and divinity, has successfully yet subtly addressed and considered politics, religion and communalism,

⁶ Apinan Poshyananda, "Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition." *Traditions / Tensions Contemporary Art in Asia* (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1996) 47.

the canon and modernist art spaces, ideas of sanctity, women's labour, indigenous and modern art forms and provoked a political and feminist reading.

Originally I was drawn to Gowda's work by the tension resonating within the startling juxtaposition of materials, and by the simple yet profound co-joining of gold leaf applied to cow-dung. The idea of using material from an animal considered a living goddess added an additional layer of meaning to Gowda's work which compelled me, someone brought up in the part of the planet where animals serve the largest meat industries ever conceived, to inquire into how and when the cow may have been conceived of as sacred and where that idea originated. I sought further evidence for the cow's sanctity, and what the cow means to many of India's people, through consulting translations of India's sacred texts and folklores. I examined cow festivals, cow cults, *goshalas* and *goshadans*, the Krishna cult and how cow-dung and other cow by-products are used in religious ritual. Because Gowda is a female artist, clearly conscious of her position in the world as an Indian woman artist, and one who deliberately picked up a medium Hindu women have been manipulating into art forms for centuries to reclaim it under Hindutva, I explored the various ways indigenous women use cow-dung and other cow-by products as a means to providing a contextual backdrop for Gowda's work. Women have used the material in ritual art and as a practical resource: as a sculpting, building, painting, protective, medicating, fertilizing and fuel burning medium. Gowda's use of the material is a radical affirmation and recognition of these women, many of whom are illiterate and have little agency.

Finally I investigated how this cow goddess in her multiple forms, and the living, biological cow - the cause of so much strife in recent Indian history-have been represented artistically. This research led way beyond the initial focus of this thesis and is subject to ongoing and further research, but I was led in this direction, because one way of looking at Gowda's art is as a comment on the sacred cow's apparent absence in India's artistic practices and as a subversive way of reclaiming a powerful icon and idea through a signifier, for example cow-dung, as a symbol of non-violence under Hindutva. This can also be analyzed as a subversive way of reentering the cow into the youngest of India's artistic expressions into the modern high arts canon, that of contemporary art. As previously mentioned, the cow, although considered sacred, is, paradoxically largely

missing in India's high arts canon; there are neither temples dedicated to her, nor are there, with very few exceptions, for a subcontinent characterized by so much production and reproduction, monumental images hewn in her name.

Gowda's art, in its complex simplicity, has startled and stirred the Hindu and non-Hindu imagination, at home and abroad. She has succeeded in finding a visual language, which with its multiple codings, fluid multiplicity, numerous connotations and layers not only speaks to a wide range of people, but also addresses numerous issues. It is a language that undulates with passion and restraint, which speaks both loudly and quietly, clearly yet veiled, accusingly, yet at the same time points the finger at no one. Her choice of artistic language and material is timely, fitting and moving, and her provocative and strong visual voice continues to have a powerful effect at multiple levels on audiences world wide.

Illustrations



Figure 1

Sheela Gowda, Oil on Canvas, 5ft x 6 ft.

Yelwala, near Mysore

Photograph: Courtesy Sheela Gowda

Specific dates and titles are not provided by the artist, but these paintings were all created between 1987 and 1989 in Yelwala, near Mysore in southern India. They deal with the semi-rural environment in which the artist found herself at that time, with the social aspects of village life and with masked violence towards women.



Figures 2 & 3

Sheela Gowda, Oil on Canvas, 5ft x 6 ft. Yelwala, near Mysore, 1987-9
Photograph: Courtesy Sheela Gowda

Figure 4
Sheela Gowda,
Oil on Canvas,
dimensions unknown,
1987-9
Yelwala, near Mysore

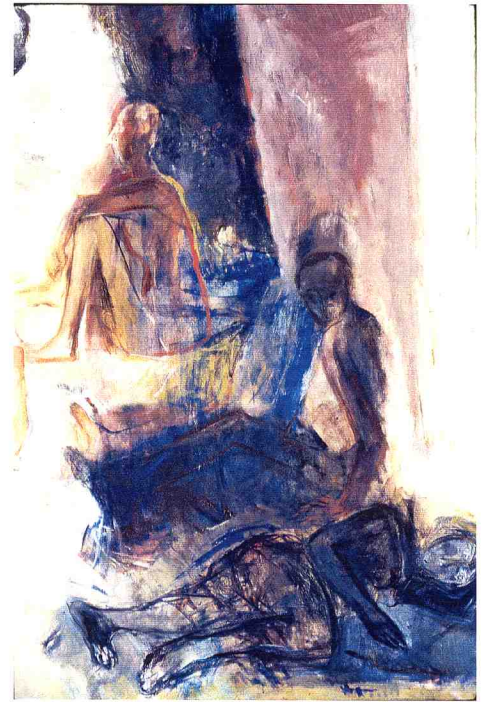


Figure 5
Sheela Gowda,
Beneath the Volcano,
Oil on Canvas, 5ft x 6 ft.
Yelwala, 1989

Photographs: Courtesy Sheela Gowda

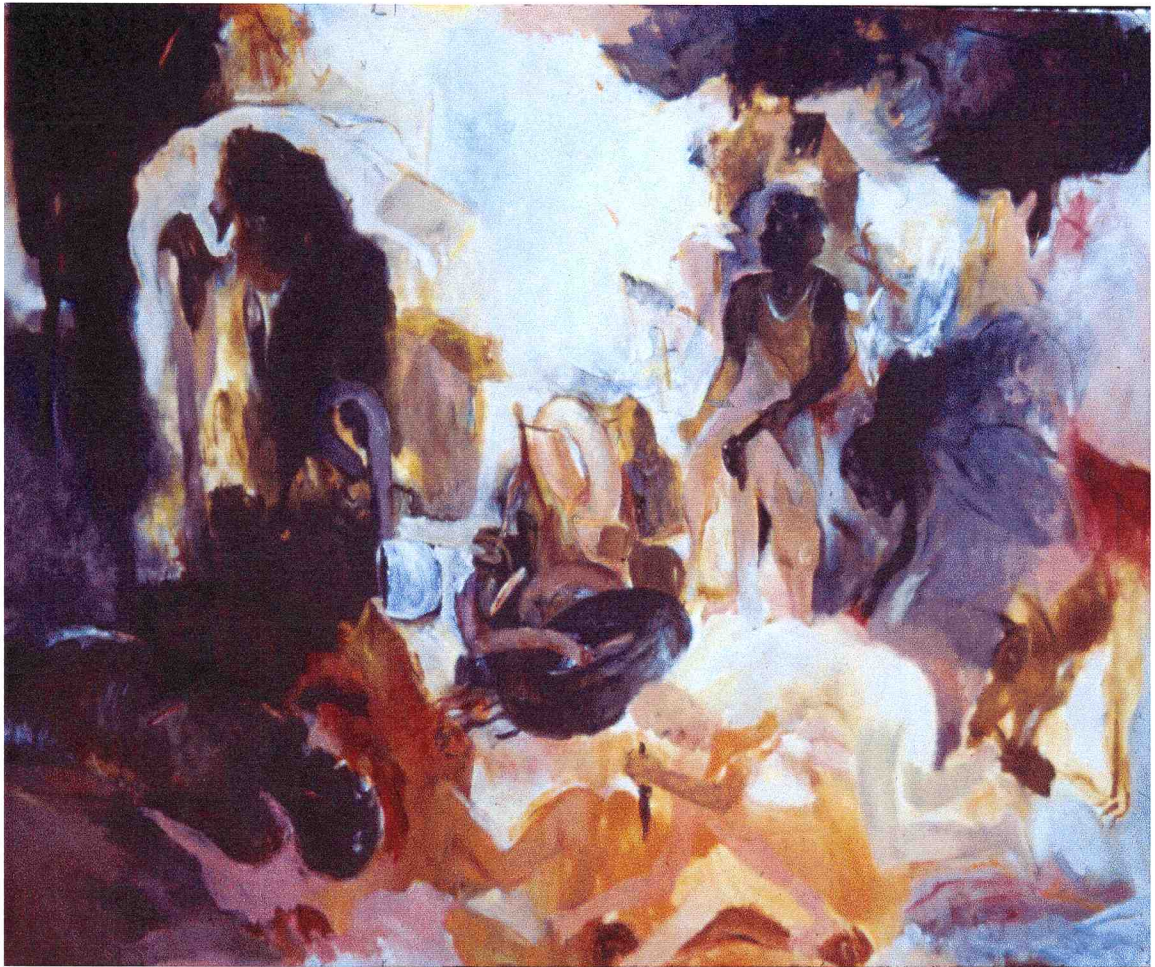




Figure 6

Sheela Gowda, *Ascension at Noon*, Oil on Canvas, 5ft x 6 ft. Yelwala 1989,
Photograph: Courtesy Sheela Gowda

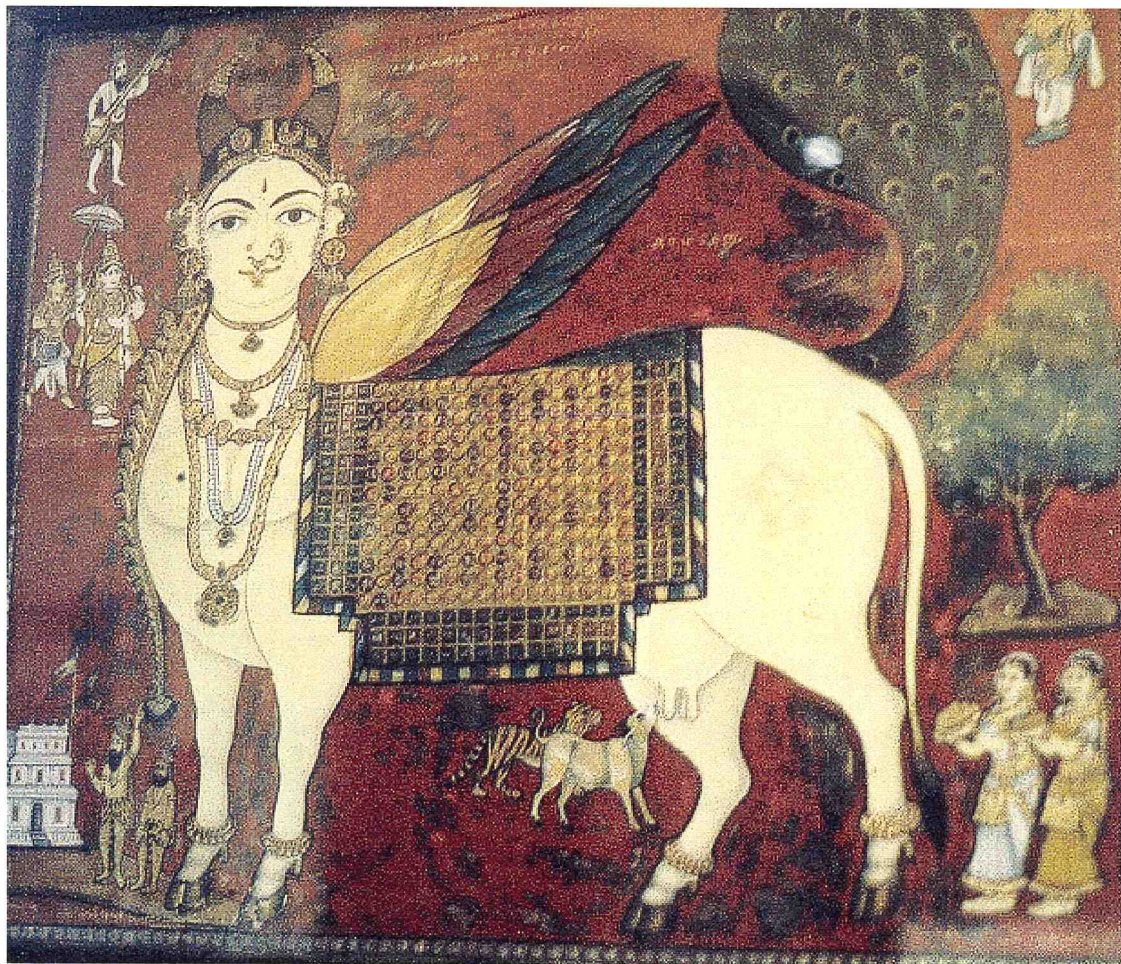


Figure 7
Kāmadhenu, Thanjore oil painting, eighteenth century, ca. 85 x 50 cm,
Maharaja Rama Varma's palace, Cochin,
Photograph: Dr. Astri Wright

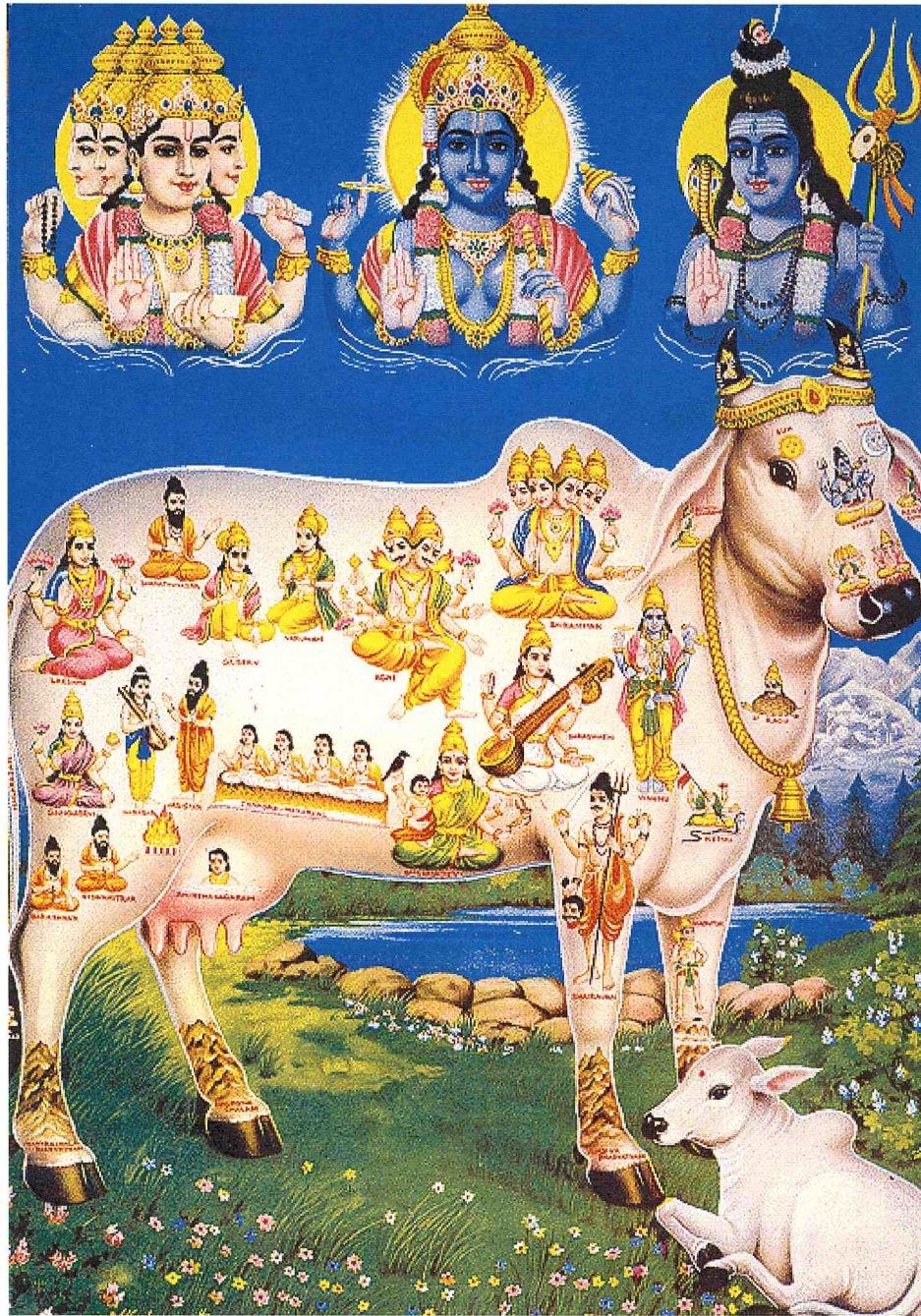


Figure 8

Cosmic Cow depicting the Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva above as well as a number of other deities and saints within the cow's body
 Photograph: Eve Millar



Figure 9
Gaymukh at Galtaji near Jaipur
Photograph: Tarun Chopra



Figure 10
South Indian devotional image depicting Lakshmi and all the good things associated with her
Photograph: Eve Millar



Figure 11
Worship of Krishna,
Cow-dung, pigment,
Sri Radharaman temple,
Vrindavan

Photograph: Robyn Beeche

Figure 12
Krishna,

Cow-dung, marigolds
pink powder, pigment
Sri Gokulanand Mandir,
Vrindavan

Photograph:
Robyn Beeche



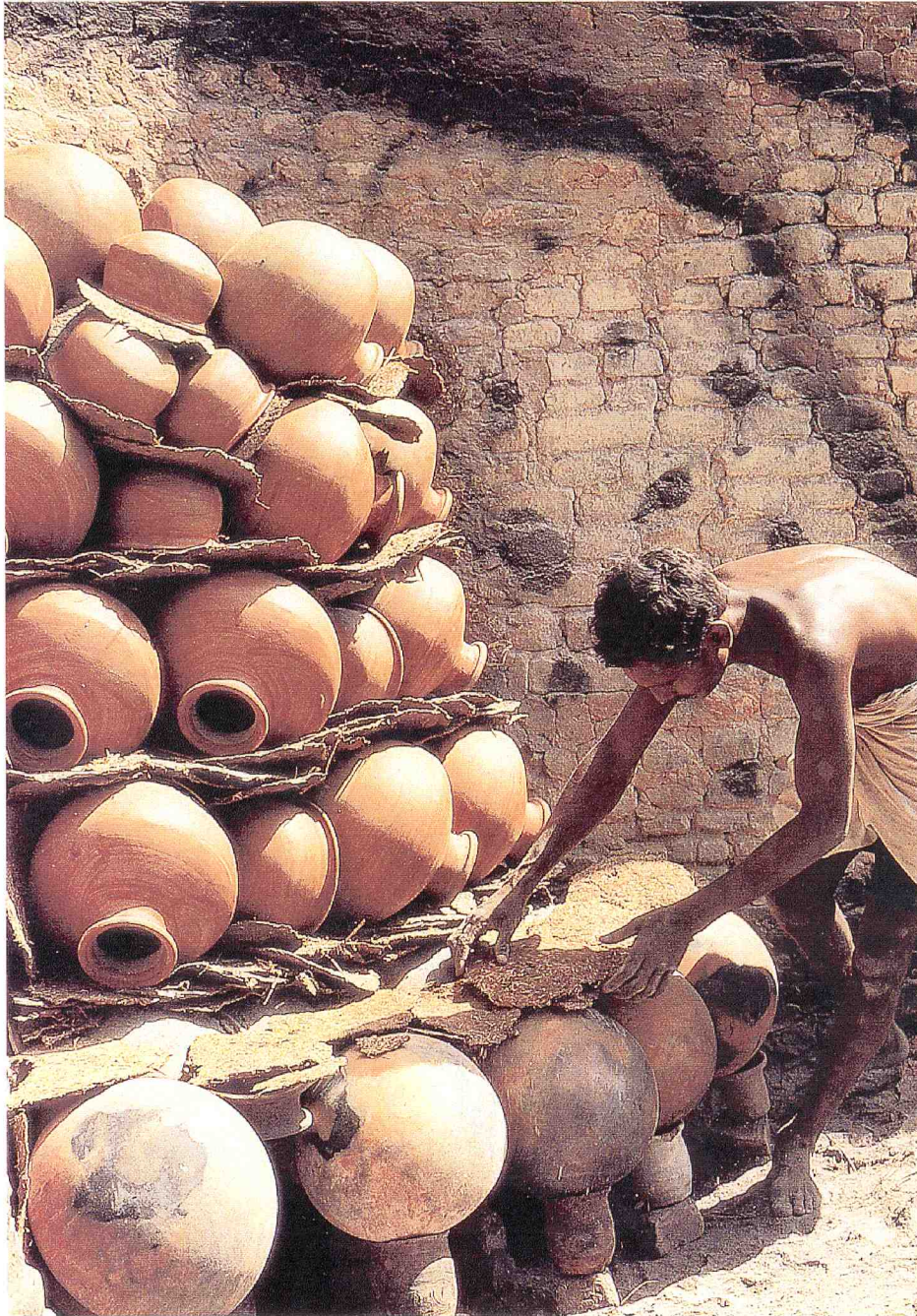


Figure 13

Firing cooking and water pots with cow-dung fuel pats for Pongal, south India
Photograph: Robyn Beeche



Figure 14
 Woman collecting dung with child
 Photograph: Jonathon Carr



Figure 15
 Example of how dung pats are stacked and left to dry
 Photograph: by E. Fontaine, courtesy of Louis Janus, Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL)
 Project, Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA),
 University of Minnesota, 617 Heller Hall 271, 19th Avenue So. Minneapolis, MN 55455 USA



Figure 16

Note dried cow-dung patties mixed with straw stacked behind this woman cooking iddies, South Indian steamed rice cakes.

Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 17
Sacred Tulsi plant
Padme Gopalakrishnan's home
Maruda, Ernakulam district
Photograph: Dr.Astri Wright



Figure 18
A Banni woman kneading gobar mitti, a mixture of mud and dung, Birandiala, Banni, Kutch
Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 19

This Maldhari woman applies gobar-mitti to walls inside and outside the home as well as to the floors. (Birandiala, Banni, Kutch)
Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 20

Eastern Puri District, Orissa
Photograph: Stephen Huyler

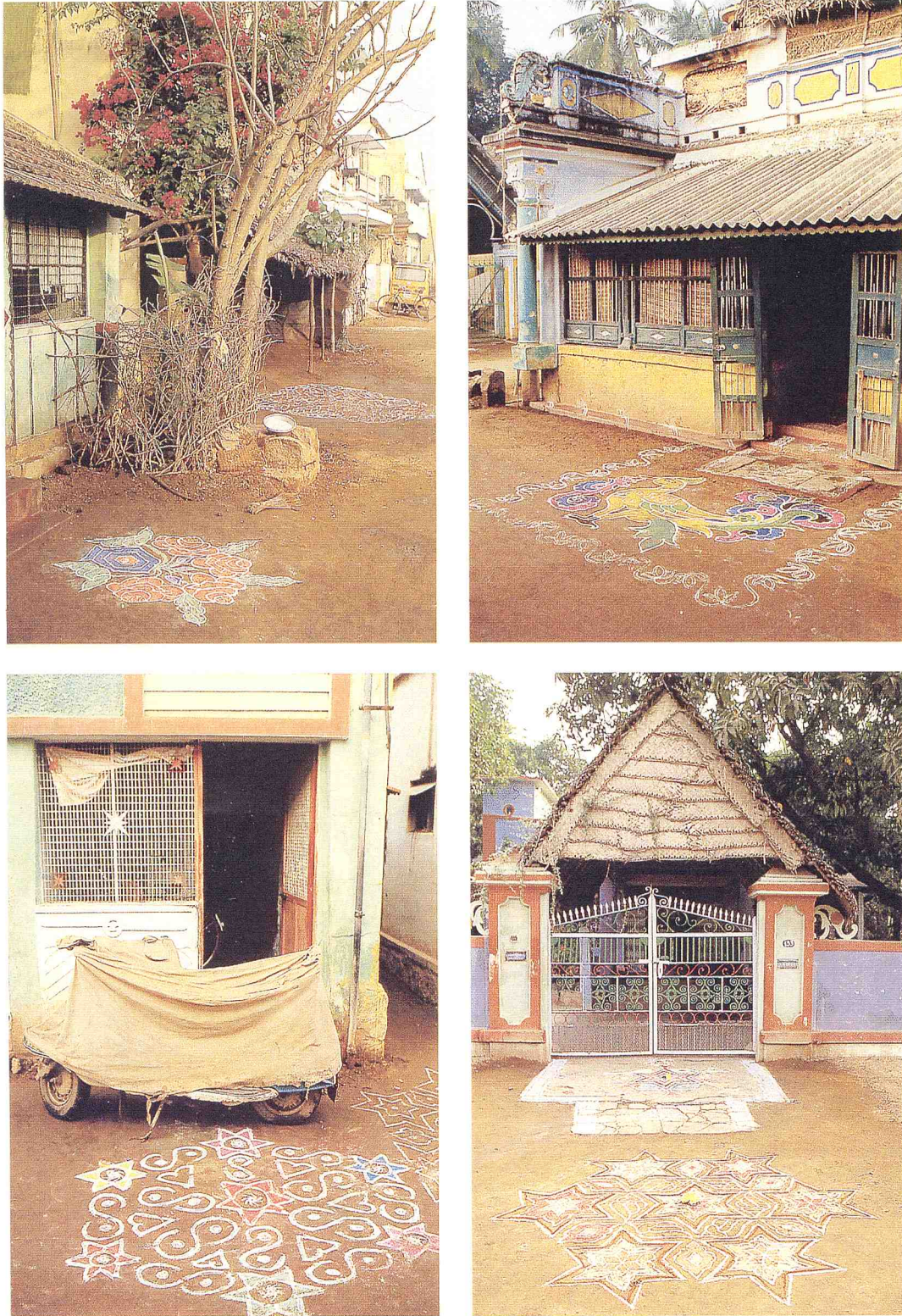


Figure 21

Kolams drawn in front of homes in Tamil Nadu
Photographs: Courtesy of Stephen Huyler



Figure 22

Semi permanent kolam painted in front of entrance into Lakshmi Krishnamurti's home, Chennai
 Photograph: Astri Wright

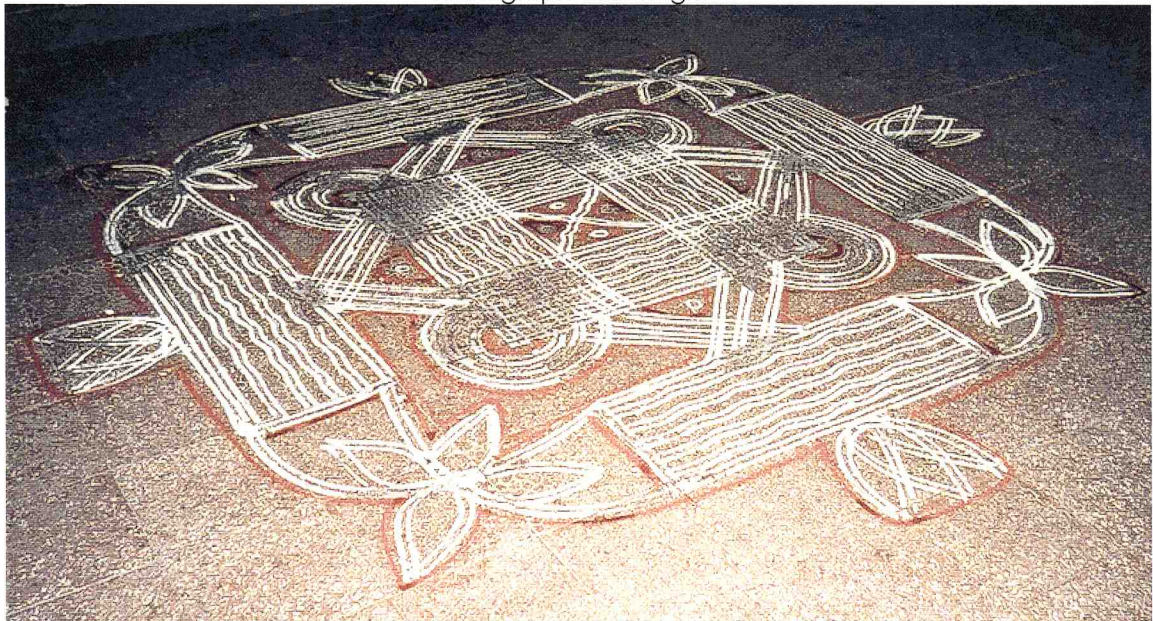


Figure 23

Semi permanent kolam painted at entrance into a wedding hall at Woodlands Hotel, Chennai
 Photograph: Eve Millar



Figure 24

Meena's Wedding with semi permanent designs painted on floor of wedding hall
Photograph: Astri Wright



Figure 25

Wedding table prepared with rice flour designs using a perforated metal tool
Photograph: Astri Wright

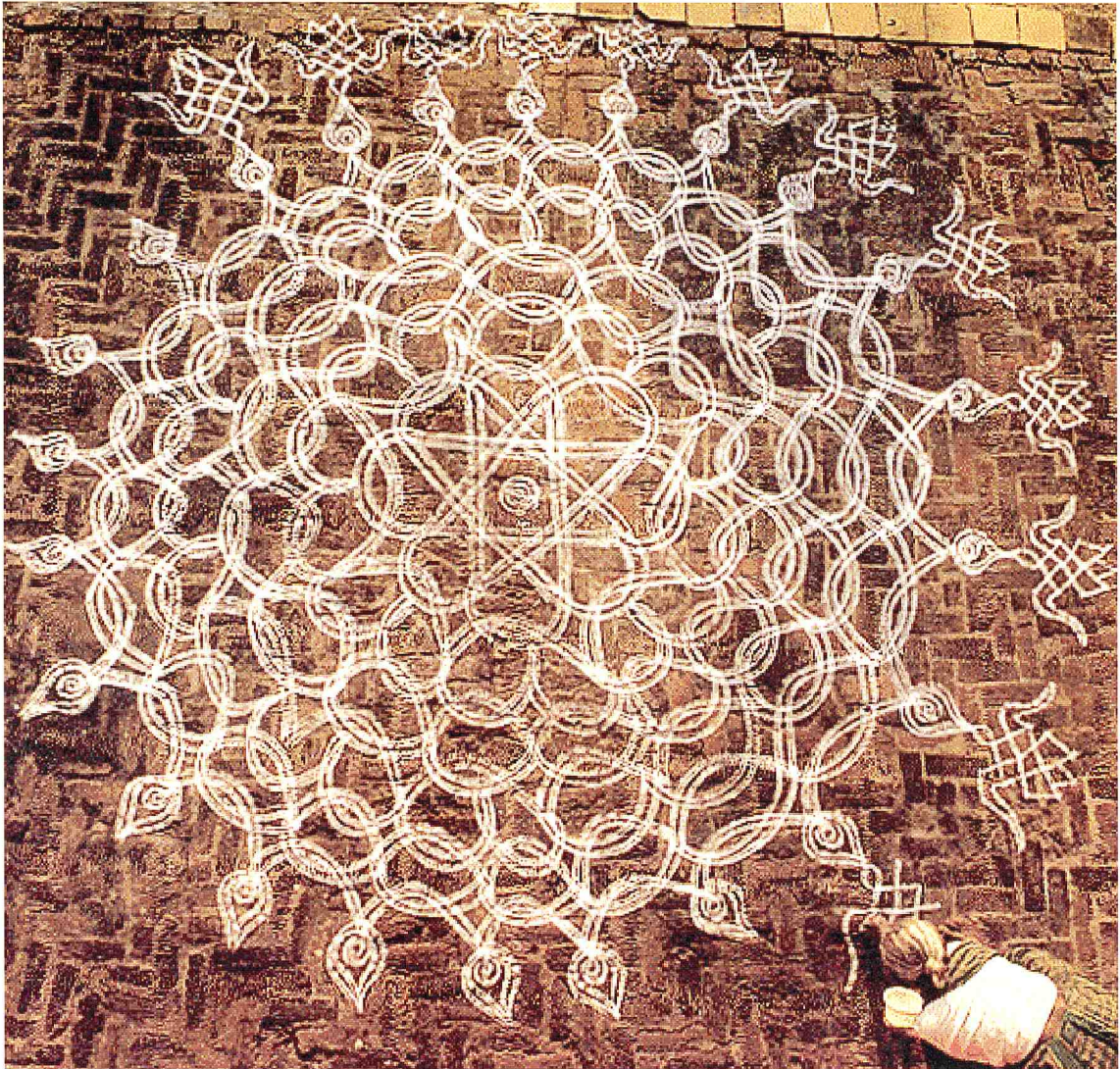


Figure 26

Woman drawing Kolam with rice flour in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu.

Photograph: Stephen Huyler.

(Huyler notes she accomplished "this elaborate freehand design" in one hour)



Figure 27
Kolam drawn for Pongal depicting a cow.
Photograph: Robyn Beeche



Figure 28
Pongal Kolam, with cow-dung balls and pumpkin flowers, Tamil Nadu
Photograph: Stephen Huyler

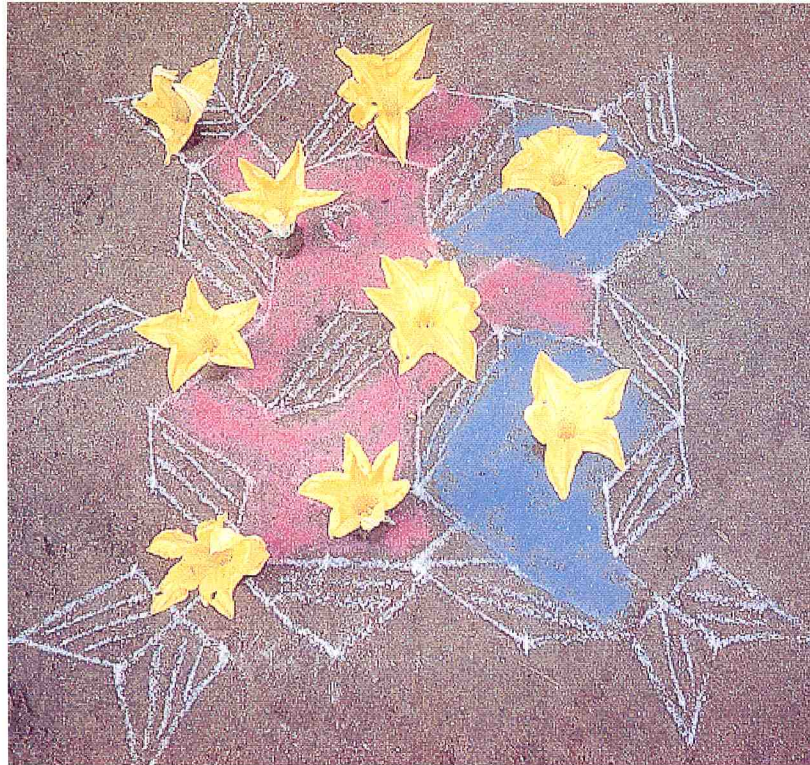


Figure 29

Pongal Kolam, with cow-dung balls and pumpkin flowers, Tamil Nadu
 Photograph: Robyn Beeche



Figure 30

A Brahmin priest prepares for the pongal ritual
 Photograph: Stephen Huyler

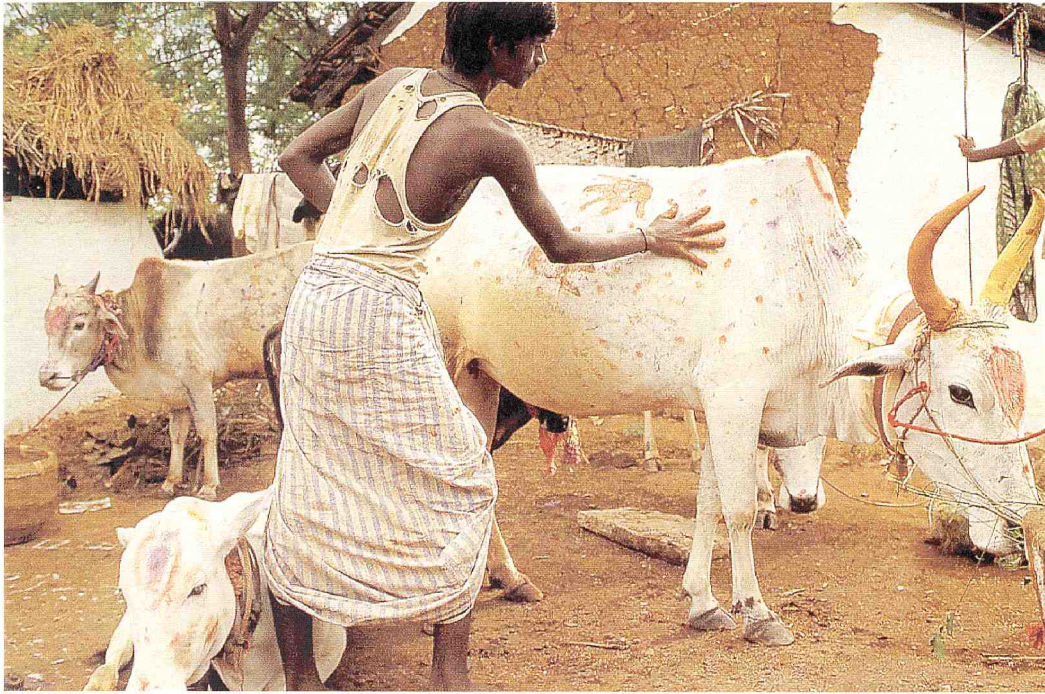


Figure 31

An example of painting cattle for a cow festival. This one is Pongal in Tamil Nadu, south India
 Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 32

A Kolam created for Pongal, in honour of the cow, Tamil Nadu, south India
 Photograph: Robyn Beeche



Figure 33

Feeding Pongal to celebrate the cow festival in Tamil Nadu, south India
Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 34
Preparing ground
with mud dung mix
for Mandana
Rajasthan

Photograph:
Stephen Huyler

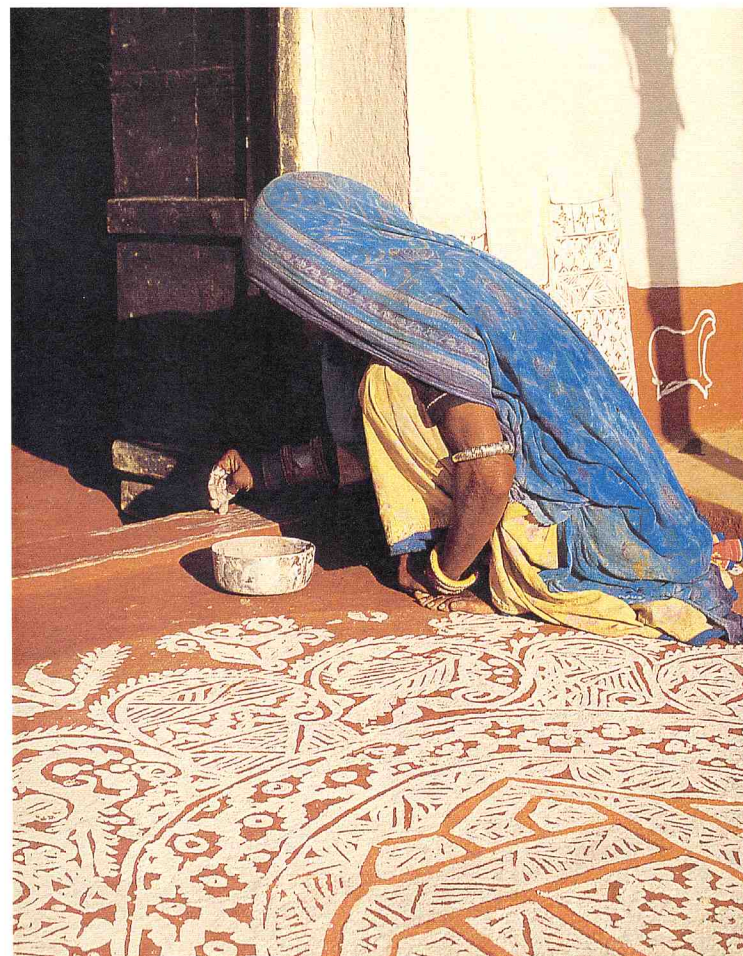


Figure 35
Creating a
Mandana
Rajasthan
Photograph:
Stephen Huyler



Figure 36
Covering last week's painting with fresh mud and dung, Orissa

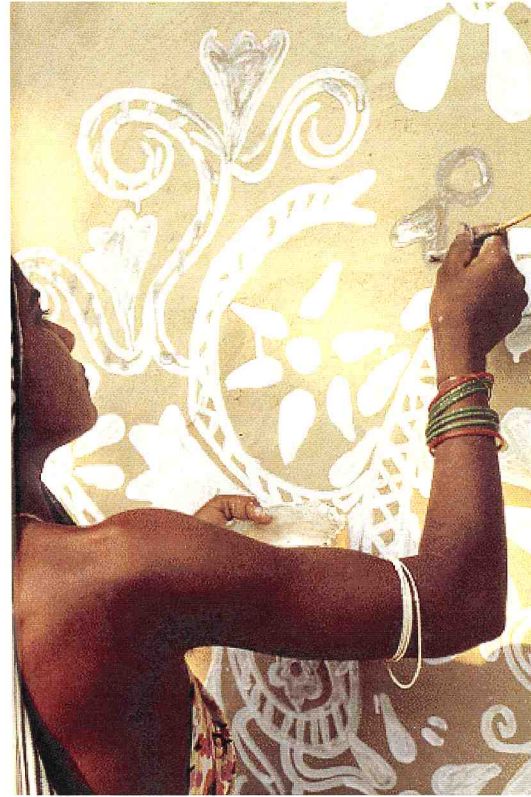


Figure 37
Painting new designs,
Orissa
Photographs: Stephen Huyler



Figure 38
Making rice paste
Photograph:
Robyn Beeche

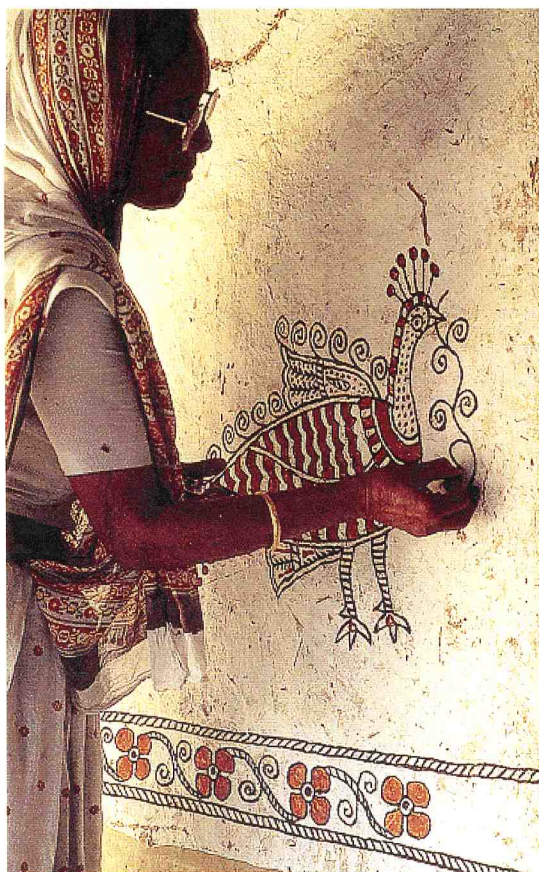


Figure 39
Drawing
Madhubani
with a twig onto
a mud and dung
plastered wall
Photograph:
Robyn Beeche

Figure 40
Sanjula Devi,
A Cow Suckling Her Calf.
Photograph: Astri Wright

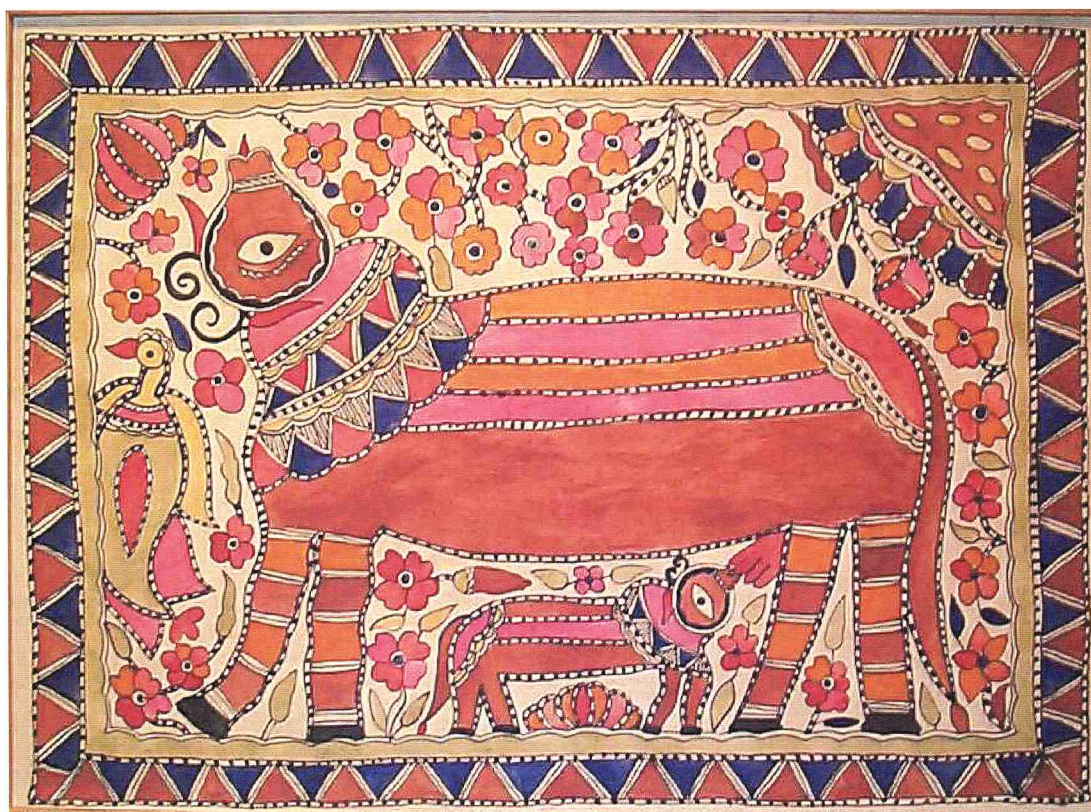




Figure 41
Yantra in south Indian temple
Photograph: Stephen Huyler

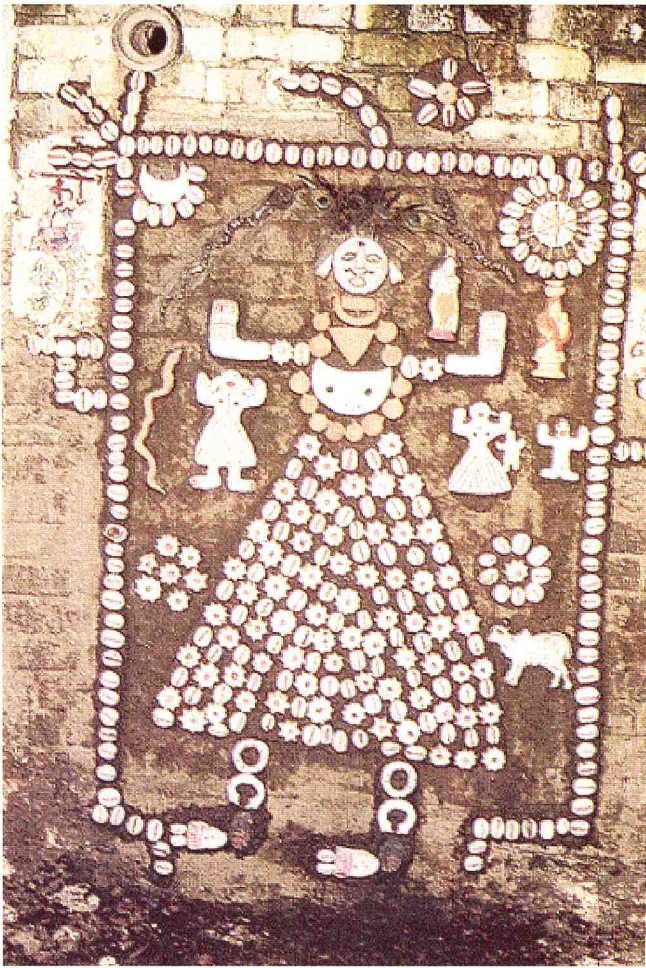
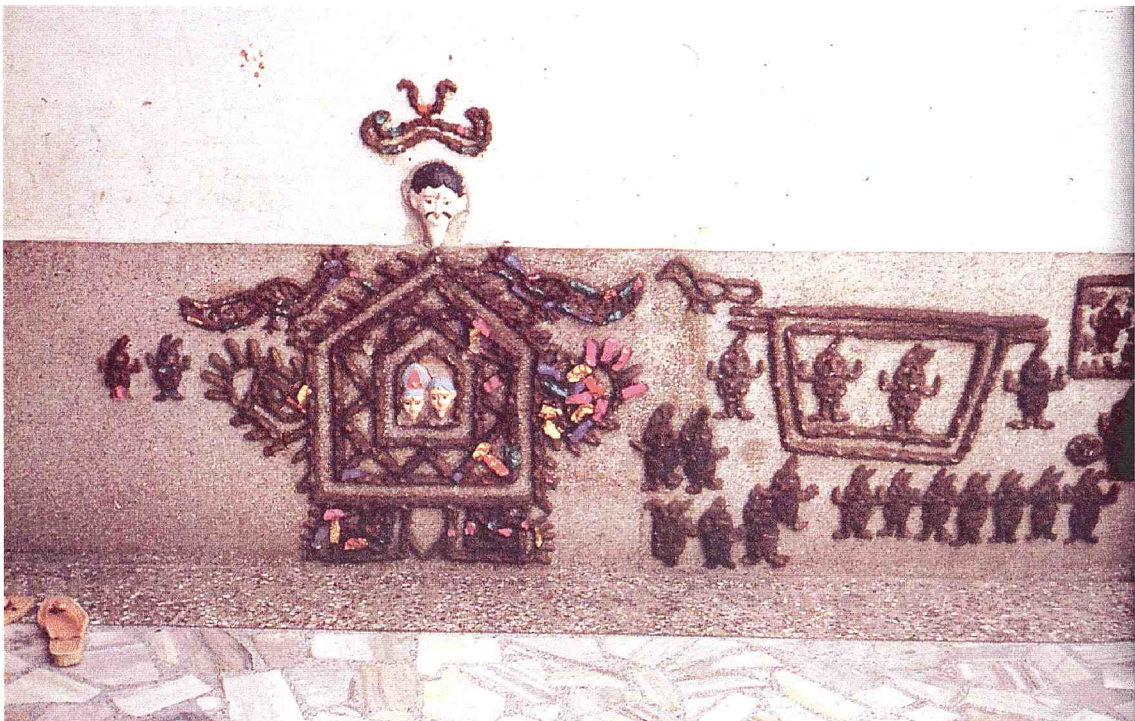


Figure 42
Sanjhi goddess
Cow-dung, shells,
clay, pigment
Photograph:
Shrivatsa Goswami

Figure 43
Sanjhi
Cow-dung, foil, clay
Photograph:
Shrivatsa Goswami



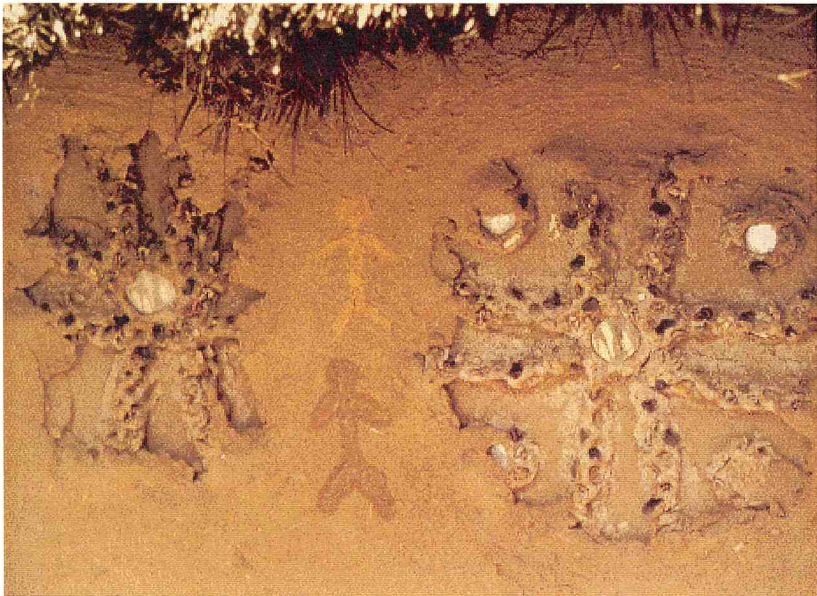


Figure 44
Sanjhi

Photograph: Stephen Huyler

Figure 45 (below)
Annakut image of Krishna

Photograph: Robyn Beeche





Figure 46
 Bas relief design
 Madhya Pradesh
 Photograph: Stephen Huyler

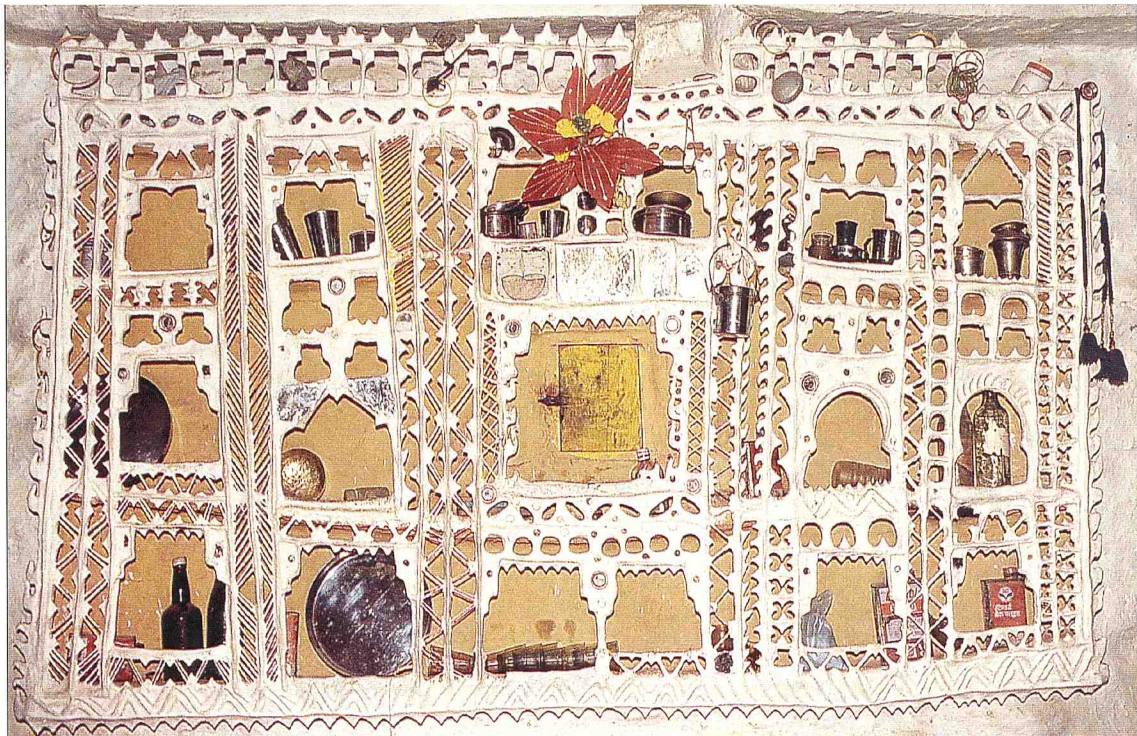
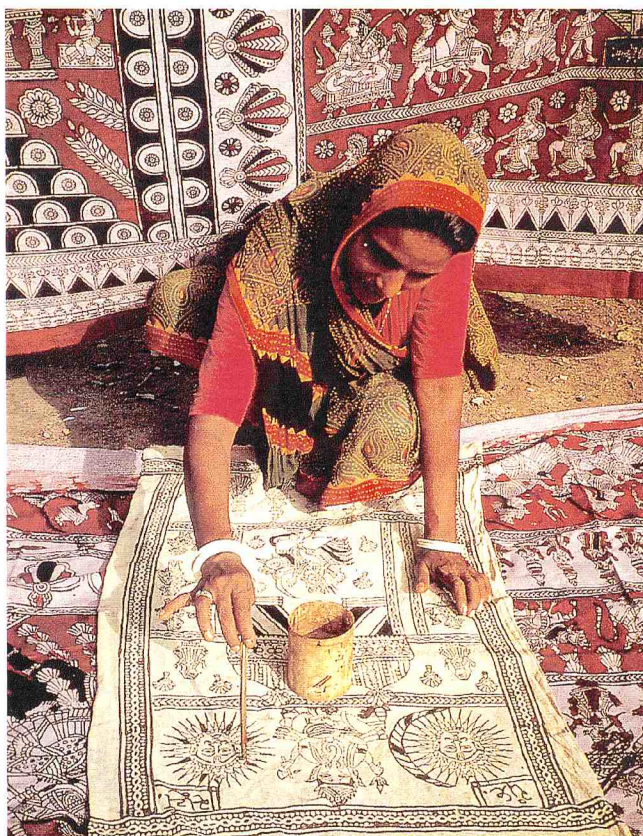


Figure 47
 An elaborate fretwork of sticks tied together and coated in mud and dung to create shelves.
 Jaisalmer district
 Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 48
 A Kalamkari
 depicting Krishna
 Ca. 50 x 100 cm
 Photograph: Eve Millar

Figure 49
 The preliminary stages
 in a Kalamkari,
 Kalahasti, Andhra Pradesh,
 Photograph: Robyn Beeche



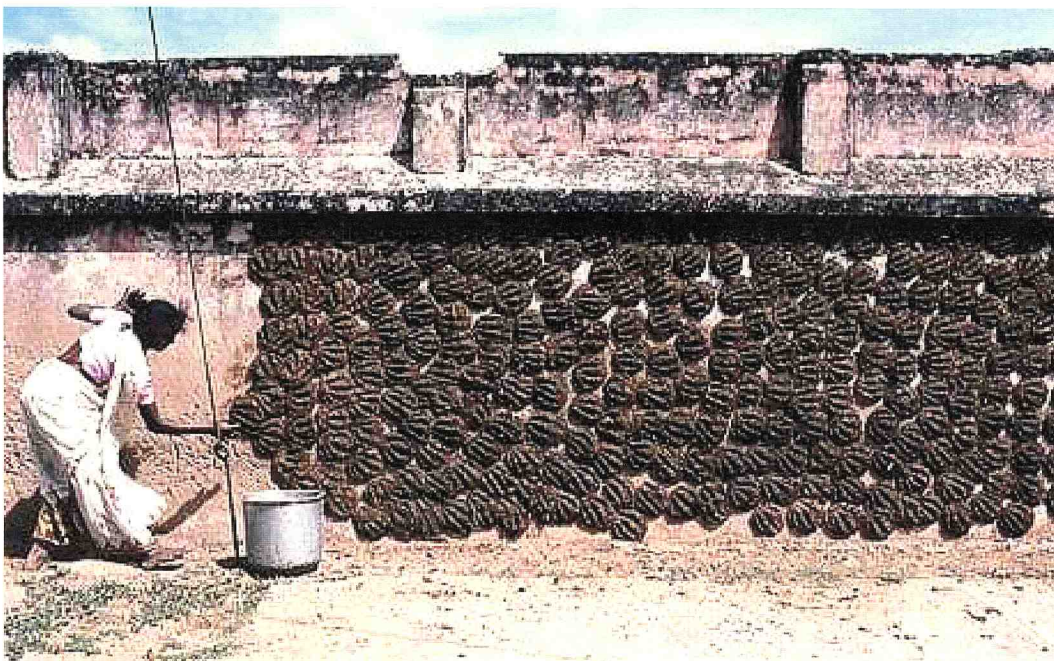


Figure 50
Drying dung patties for fuel on wall
Photograph: anonymous



Figure 51
Woman making cow-dung patties, Varanasi
Photograph: Steven Baigler



Figure 52

Cow-dung drying marked by impressions of labour, Varanasi
 Photograph: Steven Baigler

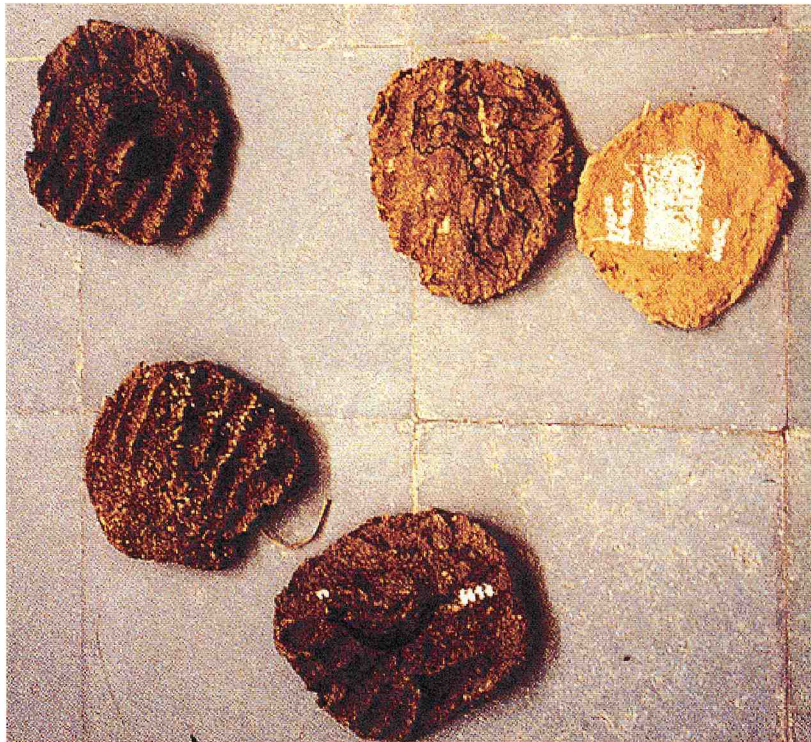


Figure 53

Sheela Gowda, Dung-pats, dimensions variable
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 54

Sheela Gowda, *Dung-pats*, dimensions variable
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 55

Installation view at Gallery Chemould, Bombay, 1993.
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist.

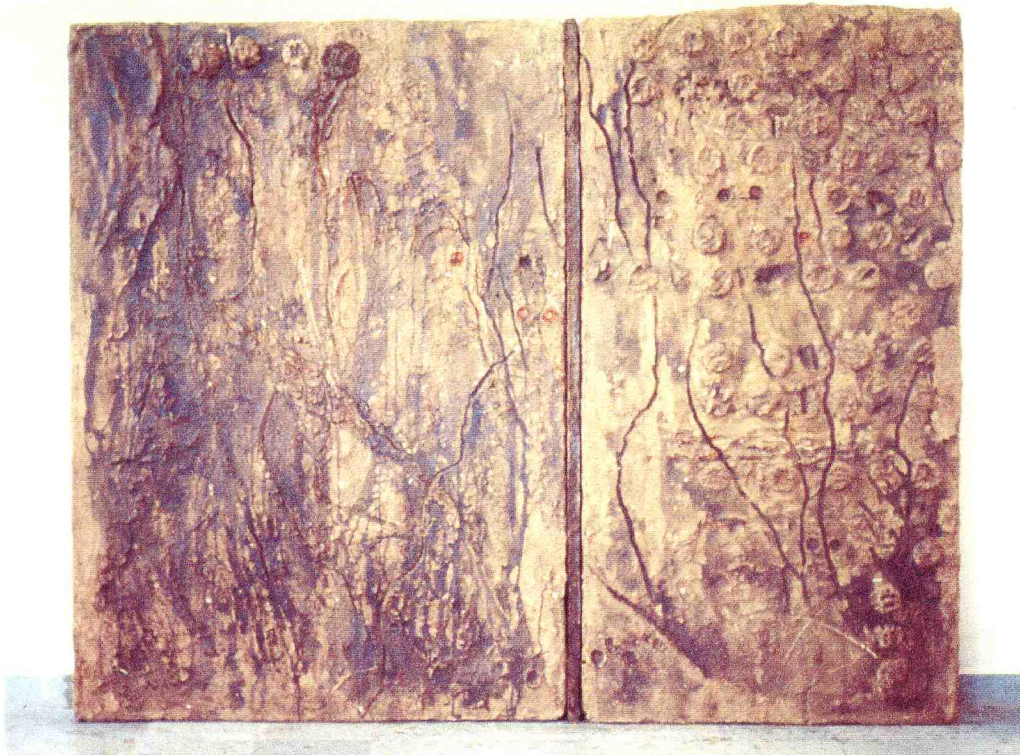


Figure 56

Sheela Gowda, 8769 miles and an inch,
 Cow-dung, kumkum, traces of rangoli powder, 1996
 3 pieces: 48" x 84" x 1" / 36" x 84" x 1" / 1" x 1" x 1"
 Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figure 57

Detail: 8769 miles and an inch 1996
 Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figure 58

A tree coloured red with kumkum.
Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 59
 Sheela Gowda. Untitled. Cow-dung, thorns
 on Paper, 1992-93. 25 X 35"
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

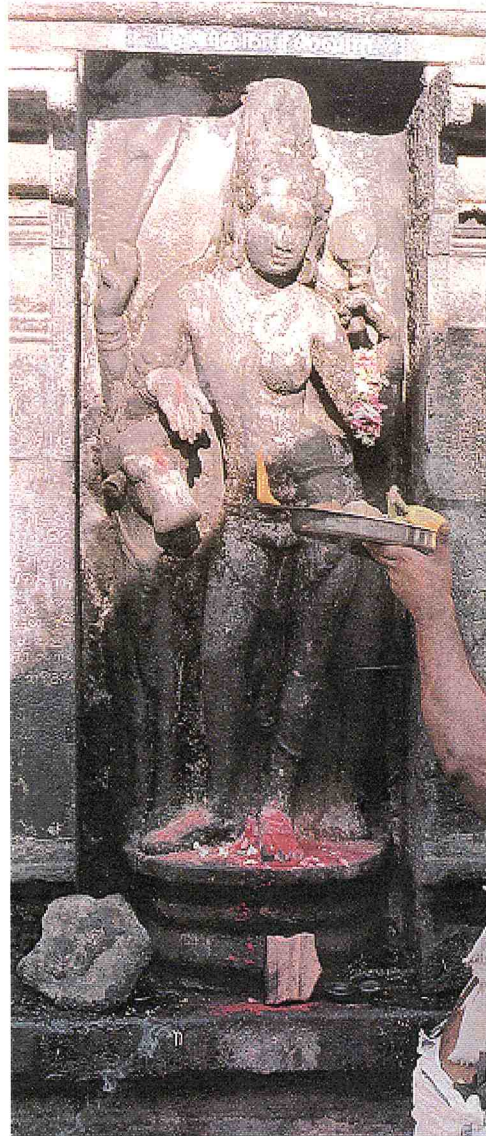


Figure 60
 Shiva Ardhanarisvara
 Photograph: Stephen Huyler



Figure 61

Sheela Gowda. Untitled. 2 of 3 (triptych), 36" x 72",
Cow-dung on paper, jute, board. 1992-93.
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 62

Sheela Gowda Untitled, 1995. Cow-dung on paper, each part measuring 48 x 96"
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 63

Sheela Gowda, Untitled. 1 of 3 (triptych) 36 x 72", 1992-93
 Cow-dung on paper, jute, board. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 64
 Sheela Gowda,
 Untitled.
 3 of 3 (triptych)
 Cow-dung on paper,
 Jute, board,
 36 x 72"
 Photograph:
 Courtesy of the artist

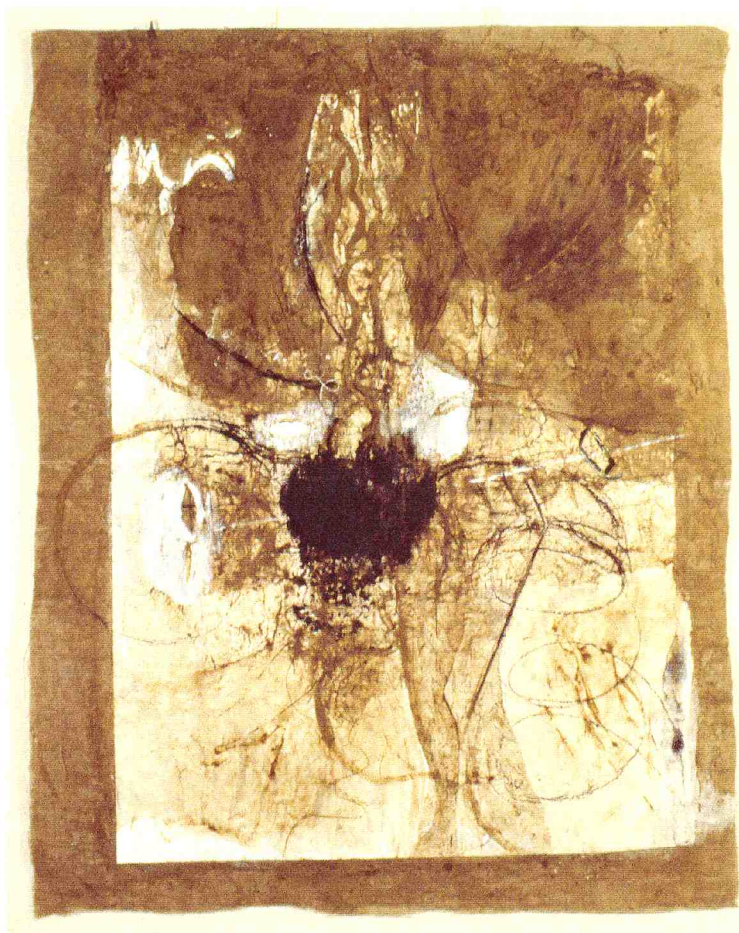
Figure 65
 Sheela Gowda
 Installation view of triptych
 Gallery Chemould,
 Bombay, 1993.
 Photograph:
 Courtesy of the artist





Figure 66
Sheela Gowda, untitled,
Cow-dung and pigment
on paper and Jute,
1992,
53 x 54"

Figure 67
Sheela Gowda, untitled,
Cow-dung, charcoal
on paper and Jute,
1992,
60 x 84"
Photographs:
Courtesy of the artist



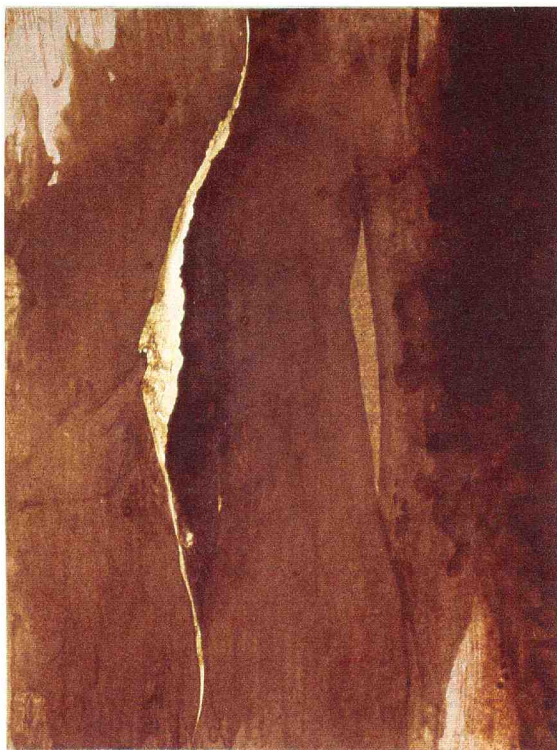
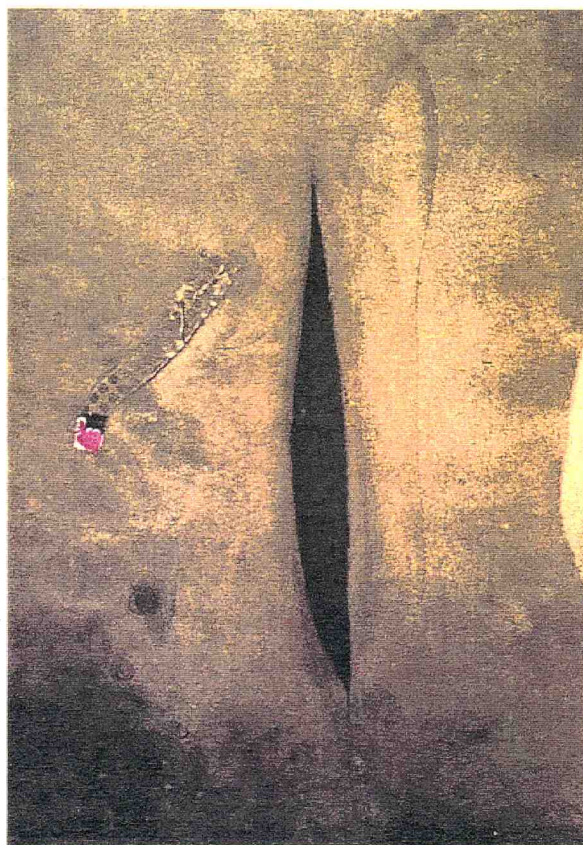


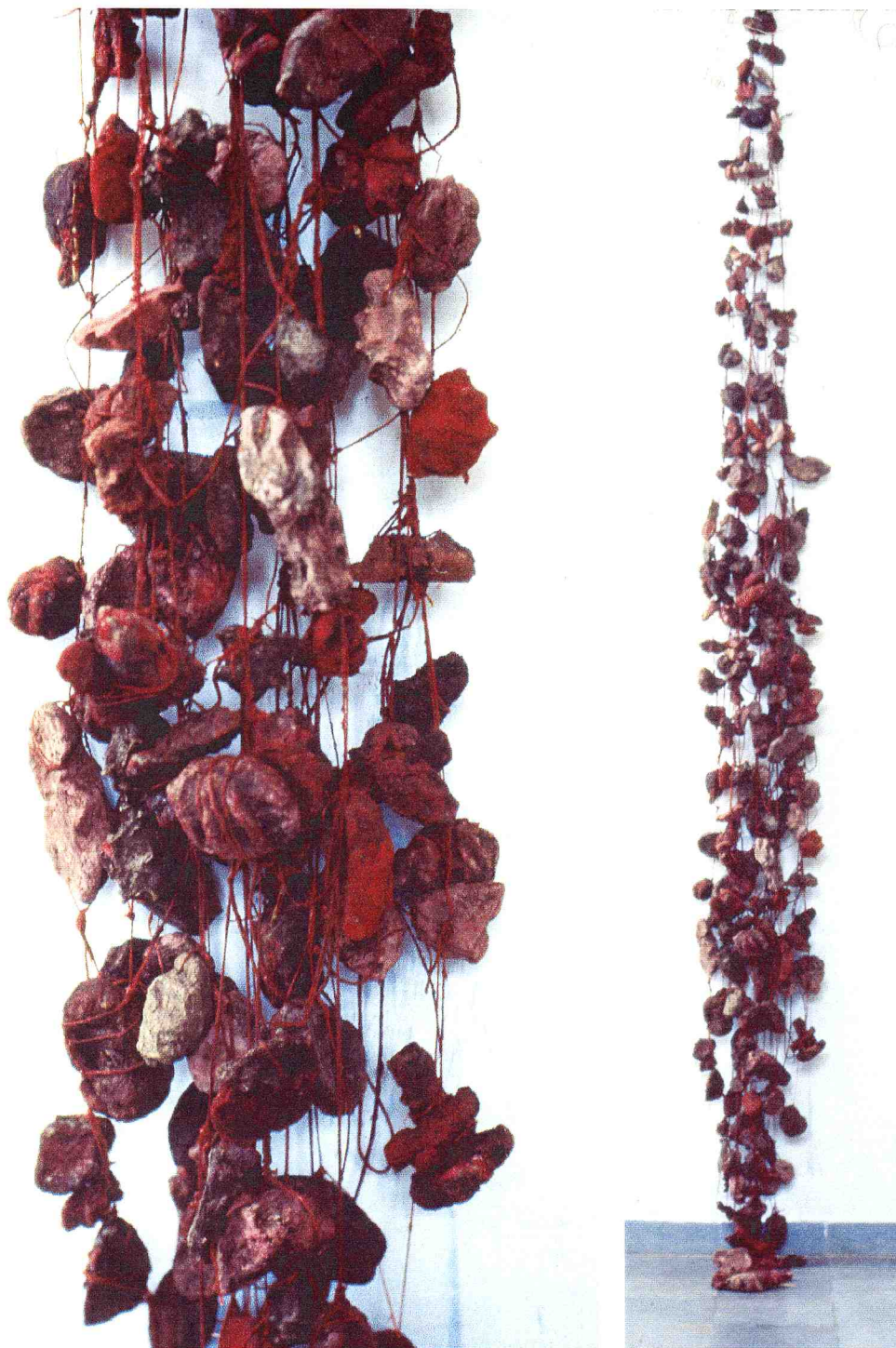
Figure 68
Sheela Gowda
Cow-dung on paper
1992-3
24 x 30"

Figure 69
Sheela Gowda,
Untitled, 1992/93,
Cow-dung, kumkum,
cloth on paper/board
24 x 30"

Figure 70
Sheela Gowda
Untitled, 1992-93.
Cow-dung, charcoal,
cloth on paper
75 x 56 cm

Photographs:
Courtesy of the artist





Figures 71 & 72

Sheela Gowda Gallant hearts, 1996.
Cow-dung, kumkum, thread 366cm x 30.5cm x 15.25 cm
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figures 73

Sheela Gowda Gallant hearts, 1996.
Cow-dung, kumkum, thread 366 x 30.5 x 15.25 cm
Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figures 74 & 75

Untitled. One of eight panels, 8" x 8" x 1"
Cow-dung, gold leaf.
1992-3 (traditions/ tensions catalogue) (1995 according to artist).
Photograph: courtesy of the artist

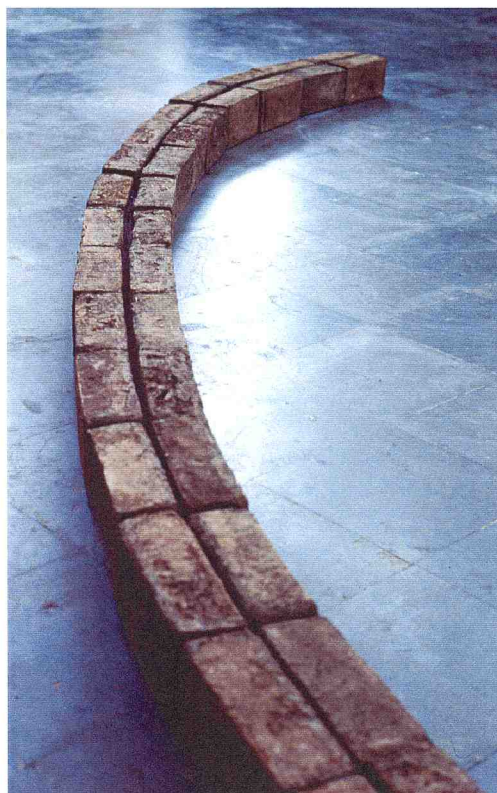


Figures 76-78

Mortar Line
1996

Cow-dung bricks
Cow-dung and
Kumkum

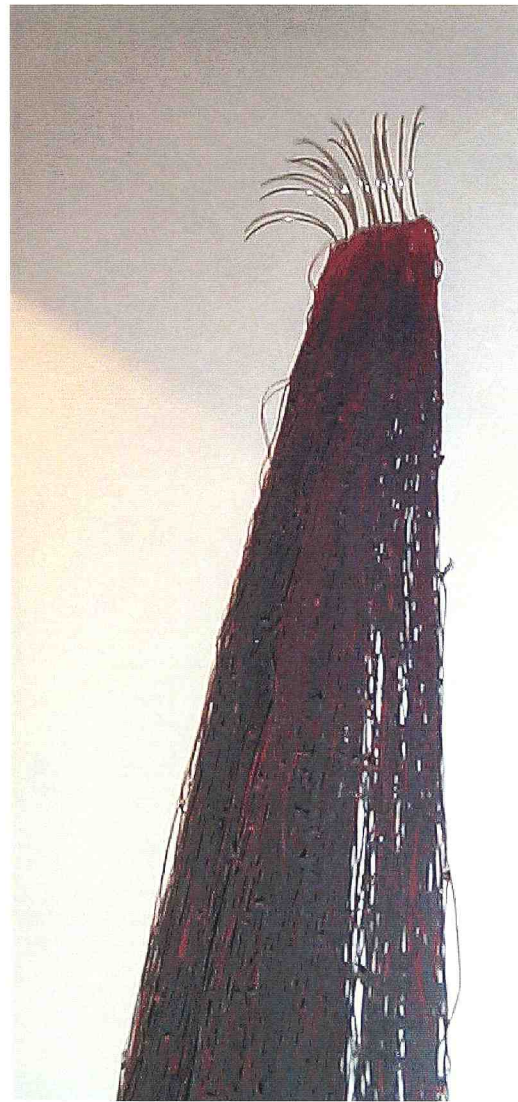
Photographs:
Courtesy of the artist





Figures 79 – 82
 Sheela Gowda
 Site specific installation, 1995
 Buddha Jayanti Park,
 New Delhi,
 Art and Nature Workshop,
 Above:
 Cow-dung and gold leaf
 plaques placed under
 bottle-brush trees.
 Center:
 Detail of brick used to
 construct well.
 Below: the well
 Photographs:
 Courtesy of the artist.





Figures 83 & 84
Draupadi's Vow
Coconut fibre, cow-dung,
needles, kumkum
1997
ca. 130 cm long
Photograph: Astri Wright



Figure 85

Sheela Gowda working on *And Tell Him of My Pain* in her studio in Bangalore
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

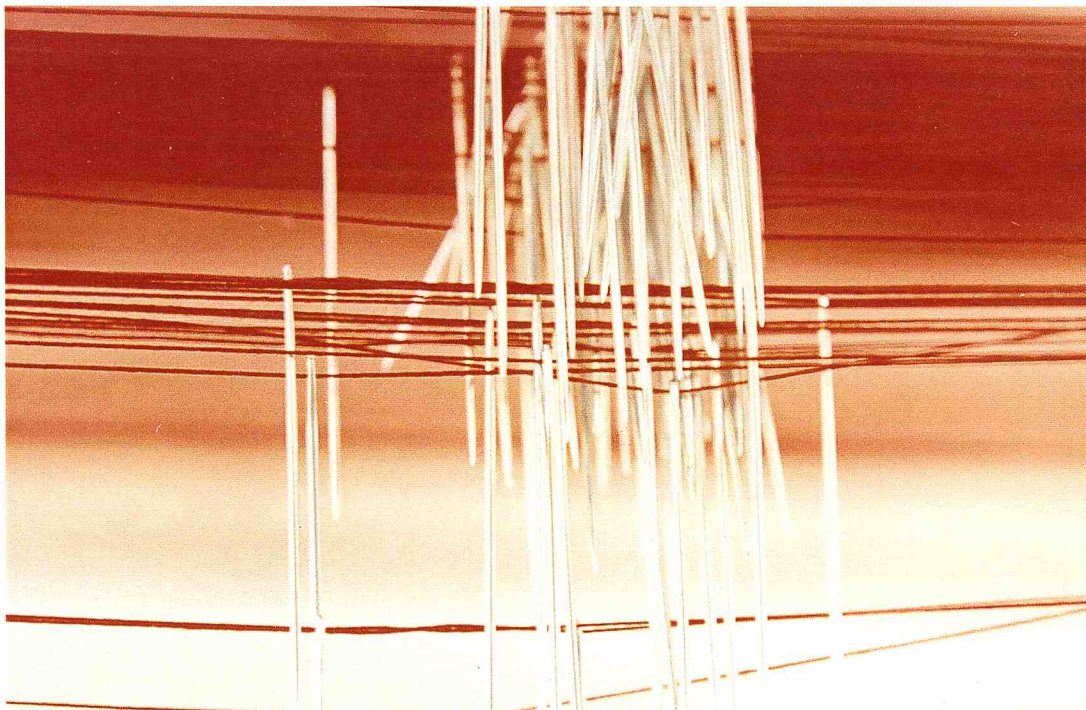
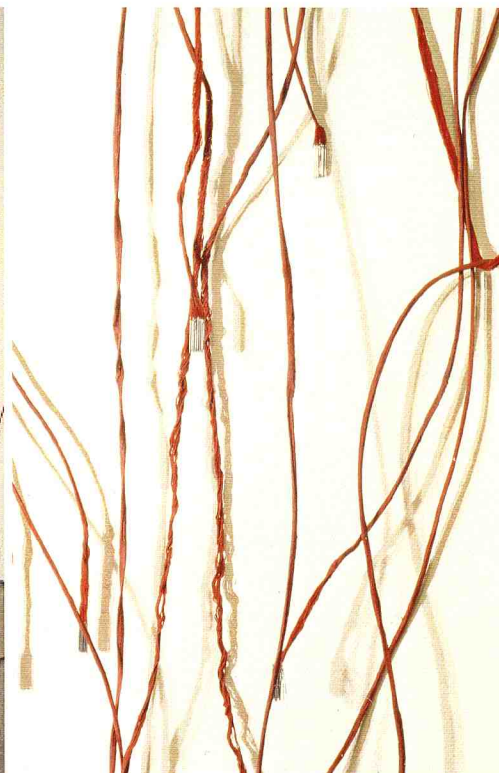
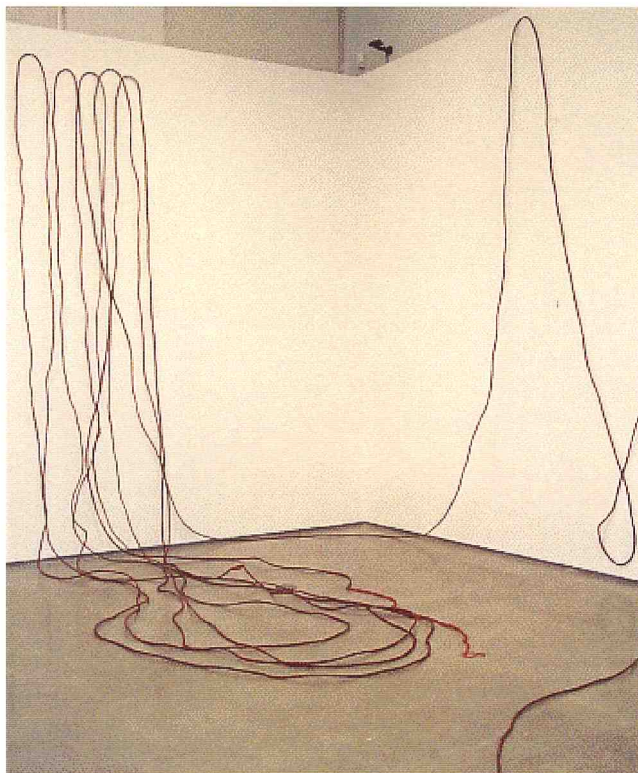


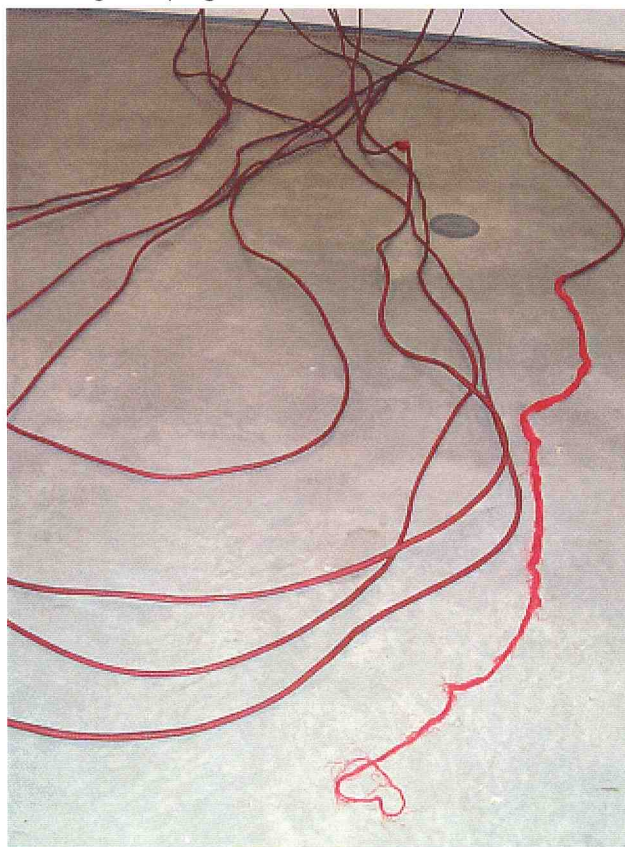
Figure 86

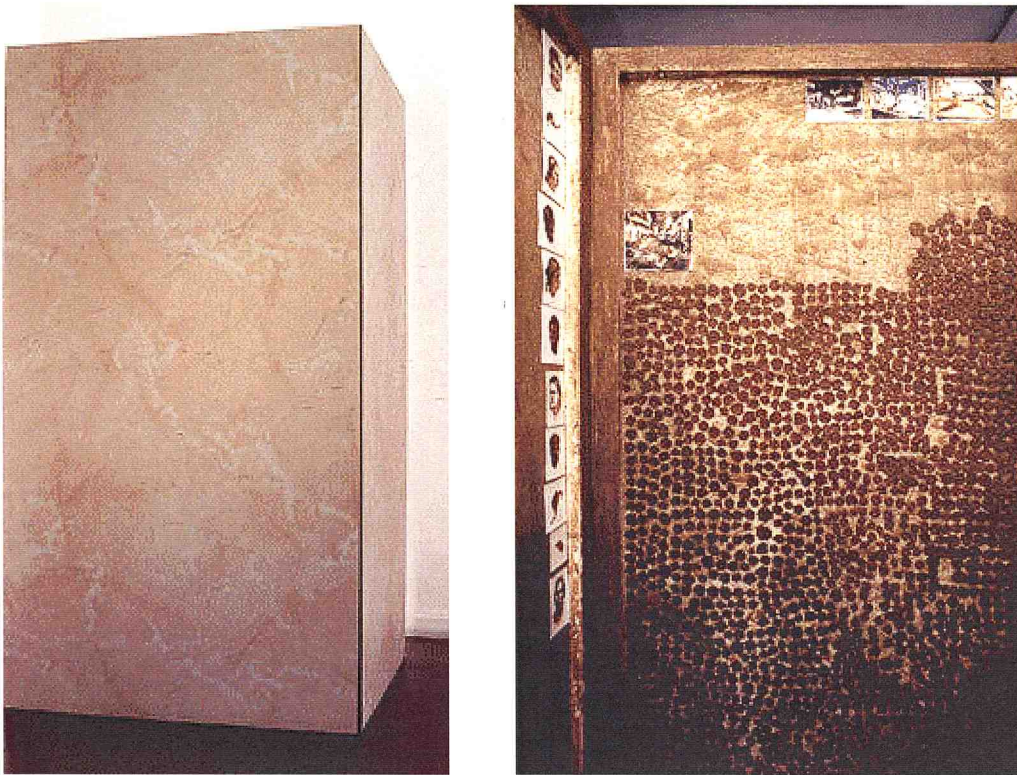
Threading each needle through 700 ft of thread.
 Photograph: Courtesy of the artist



Figures 87-90

Sheela Gowda *And Tell Him of My Pain Needles*, thread, kumkum, neem, glue, 1998
 Photograph: left upper, bottom right: Astri Wright, top right, lower left: Sheela Gowda,





Figures 91 & 92

Sheela Gowda, Private Gallery,
 Two door-sized panels (ca 80 x 32") set at a 90-degree angle in the corner of a gallery,
 Formica sheeting, cow dung smeared walls, cow pats, watercolour paintings on inside
 Photographs: courtesy of the artist



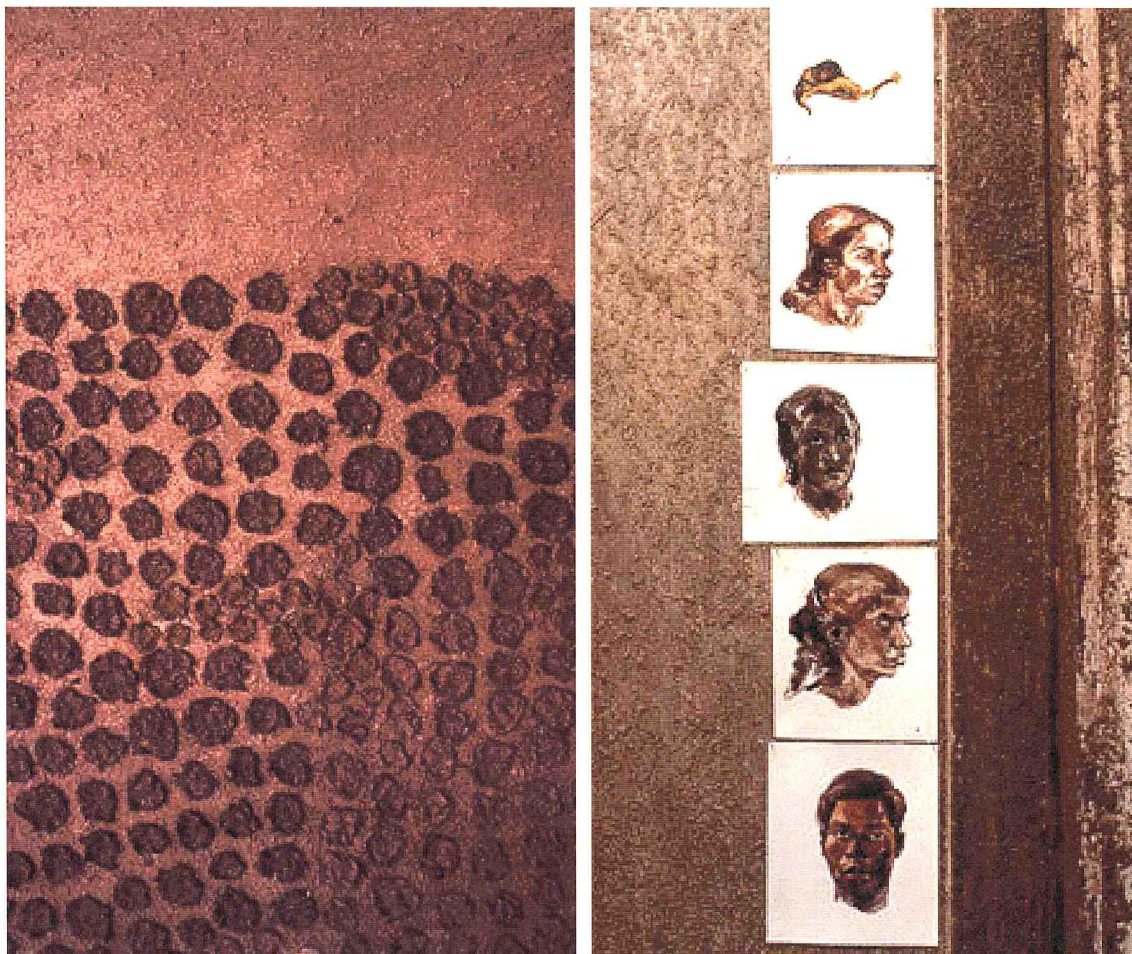
Figure 93

Sheela Gowda, Private Gallery, Interior view
 Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figure 94

Sheela Gowda, *Private Gallery*, Interior view details showing water colours depicting Gowda's home environment
 Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figures 95 & 96

Sheela Gowda, *Private Gallery*, Interior, details with miniature cow dung pats ca 4 cm in diameter and water colour portraits of people living around Gowda's home environment
 Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figure 97
Sheela Gowda, *Nett Weight (Buthi)* 2004
mixed media, cow-dung, wood, fibre
Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figure 98
The CDs used to cast the cow-dung roti
Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figure 99
Sheela Gowda, *Nett Weight (Buthi)* 2004, detail
Photograph: courtesy of the artist

Glossary

<i>aarathi</i> , arti, Skt: <i>arati</i> :	ceremonial waving of light, burning ghee or camphor, as an offering during <i>puja</i> .
<i>abisheka</i>	the bathing or anointing of a deity with a liquid, which may consist of milk, oil, ghee or fragrant water.
<i>ahimsa</i>	doctrine of non-violence
<i>alpona</i>	Bengali term for protective decorative designs
<i>amrta</i> :	nectar of divine bliss; the drink of immortality obtained by churning the cosmic ocean of milk
<i>ananda</i> :	bliss
<i>anava</i> :	ignorance
<i>apna</i> :	term used in the western Himalayas to describe women's magico-religious diagrams
<i>ardha</i> :	half
<i>Ardhanarisvara</i> :	Shiva embodied as half woman, half man.
<i>aripan</i> :	semi-geometrically inspired floor designs
<i>aripana</i>	term used in Bihar to describe the protective decorative designs made by women
<i>ashram</i> :	place of spiritual retreat
<i>Atman</i> :	the self or soul
<i>Avatar</i> :	a voluntary incarnation of god
<i>Ayodhya</i> :	city in Uttar Pradesh where Babri Masjid was demolished
<i>Ayurveda</i> :	the Vedic scripture on the science of healing
<i>Babri Masjid</i>	mosque demolished in 1992 in Ayodhya
<i>bhakti</i>	devotion
<i>Bharatiya Janata Party</i>	(BJP) Indian People's Party
<i>bhitti chitra</i> :	wall paintings (madhubani district)
<i>Bhogi-pongul</i> :	pongul of joy
<i>buthi</i> :	bundle (in Kannada)
<i>bija</i> :	seed
<i>Brahmacarya</i> :	the student stage when the boy learns to recite the Vedas; one of four stages of life described in Hindu texts; only twice born boys, those who received the sacred thread in their initiation ceremony (<i>upanayana</i>) could enter all four stages; <i>brahmacarya</i> ; <i>grihasta</i> (householder); <i>vanaprashtha</i> (forest dweller); <i>sannyasa</i> (renouncer)
<i>Brahmin</i> :	caste of scholars, priests.
<i>Chakla</i> :	ceremonial square textile hanging (Gujarat)
<i>Chaukpurna</i> :	term used in Madhya Pradesh to describe the protective designs women create
<i>cheety</i> :	a brightly printed cotton fabric favoured by village women
<i>Ciklita</i> :	Moisture, one of Lakshmi's two sons

<i>Dalit:</i>	preferred term used by those once referred to as untouchable (also known as Harijans)
<i>darsan:</i>	to see and be seen by God, the act of being blessed in the presence of a deity, a sacred object or a guru, the auspicious sight of a deity
<i>Devi:</i>	the goddess
<i>dharma:</i>	the righteous path / the law, the way, the teaching
<i>Divali:</i>	the festival of lights dedicated to Lakshmi
<i>Draupadi:</i>	the five <i>Pandava</i> brothers' common wife
<i>drishti-dosha:</i>	masks created to either attract the attention of any one with a malicious intent, thus diverting the evil glance away from the desired area that needs protection, or masks created that are so horrific to look at they will scare away the evil eye.
<i>dugdha:</i>	milk (Sanskrit)
<i>Durga:</i>	goddess brandishing male gods' attributes in order to overcome the demon of ignorance
<i>Dwaraka:</i>	Development of Weavers and Rural Artisans in Kalamkari Art. A not for profit organization in Bangalore
<i>Ganga:</i>	goddess of the Ganges river, she resides in Shiva's hair
<i>Ganesha:</i>	the elephant headed god, one of Shiva's sons
<i>garbha:</i>	germ
<i>garbhagrha:</i>	the temple's womb chamber
<i>garbhadhana:</i>	the implanting of the seed
<i>Gauri:</i>	another name for the goddess Parvati (Shiva's consort).
<i>gaymukh / gomukha:</i>	cow's muzzle. Water is often directed to flow through the gaymukh
<i>genii loci:</i>	local spirits or place sprits
<i>ghee / ghi:</i>	clarified butter
<i>go:</i>	cow (Sanskrit)
<i>gobar:</i>	cow-dung
<i>gobar-mitti:</i>	mud and dung mixture
<i>Godavari:</i>	a river
<i>goluka:</i>	the cow heaven (Braj)
<i>Gomata</i>	divine cow mother
<i>Gomukha</i>	cow's muzzle
<i>go-mutra</i>	cow's urine
<i>gopa / gopi</i>	cow herder / milk maid
<i>go-pada</i>	footprints of cows,
<i>Gopala Gorakshak Govinda</i>	Names for Krishna as protector of cows.
<i>Gopastami festival:</i>	also known as <i>Gocharan</i> , the grazing of the cows
<i>gopuram:</i>	temple gateway in south India
<i>go- puja:</i>	cow worship
<i>gorakshan</i>	cow protection
<i>goseva</i>	service to the cow
<i>goshala</i>	cow home

<i>Goshhastami:</i>	A cow festival celebrated throughout India in the month of Karttika. A special day set aside for the cow.
<i>goshta:</i>	a standing place for cows
<i>Guru:</i>	spiritual teacher, advisor
<i>Harijan:</i>	children of god. A term used by Gandhi to describe the out-castes, the untouchables, today known as the Dalit, or scheduled castes.
<i>Hindutva:</i>	Hindu revivalists
<i>idli:</i>	steamed rice cake; a popular breakfast item in south India
<i>jaggery:</i>	palm sugar
<i>Jain:</i>	a religion started by Mahavira in ca. 500 BCE. Teaches <i>ahimsa</i> , non-violence.
<i>jali:</i>	screens
<i>Jati:</i>	caste
<i>jivat khans</i>	insect rooms
<i>kaccha:</i>	materials such as clay or mud which absorb impurities
<i>kalam:</i>	pen
<i>Kalamkari:</i>	painted cloth. Literally means pen work.
<i>kalasa:</i>	a water pot
<i>Kamadhenu:</i>	wish fulfilling cow
<i>Kapila:</i>	cow
<i>kari:</i>	work
<i>Kardama:</i>	Mud, one of Lakshmi's sons
<i>karma:</i>	the sum of actions causes the soul to reincarnate
<i>kar sevak:</i>	one who does service though work; in the Babri Masjid context, it refers to an agitator
<i>karisini:</i>	The One Possessing Dung, (Lakshmi).
<i>kumkum:</i>	red turmeric powder, used as a pigment
<i>kolam:</i>	ritual diagrams
<i>Kshatriya:</i>	warrior caste
<i>Lakhindra:</i>	Male painter hired to create <i>pithoro</i> paintings by the Tribal people in Alirajpur, Madhya Pradesh.
<i>lingam:</i>	Shiva's attribute, his phallus
<i>lila:</i>	divine play
<i>lota bowls:</i>	pots used as holy water sprinklers
<i>Mahabharata:</i>	great Hindu epic
<i>Mahatmya texts:</i>	verse texts that praise a holy place or time, either in Sanskrit or in the local language within which the legends take place
<i>Mandanas:</i>	term used in Rajasthan to describe women's ritual diagrams
<i>Mandela:</i>	a circular diagram
<i>Manu:</i>	lawmaker
<i>Manusmriti:</i>	laws of Manu composed ca 200 BCE.
<i>mantra:</i>	a rhyme, verse or sound chanted
<i>Mariamman:</i>	south Indian Goddess
<i>maya:</i>	illusion

<i>muggulu:</i>	term used in Andhra Pradesh to describe women's protective designs
<i>Naga:</i>	snake
<i>Neem:</i>	derived from the Neem tree; an antiseptic, mosquito deterrent and toothpaste ingredient. Neem twigs used to brush teeth.
<i>Osa:</i>	term used in Orissa to describe semi-abstracted magico-religious designs created by women
<i>Padmasambhava:</i>	the lotus born, refers to Lakshmi, the lotus goddess.
<i>pal:</i>	milk (Dravidian languages)
<i>Palampores:</i>	a Hindi-Persian combination meaning bedcovers / calicoes
<i>Pancamrit:</i>	five nectars (usually includes cow by-products)
<i>Pancagavya:</i>	five products from the cow imbibed during ritual ceremony
<i>Pandava brothers:</i>	Draupadi's husbands. The Mahabharata tells how they gamble away Draupadi, their common wife, and their kingdom in a game of royal dice.
<i>pani:</i>	water (Hindi)
<i>Parikrama:</i>	circumambulating a sacred image
<i>Pechhavais:</i>	cloth temple hangings
<i>Pinjrapole:</i>	Jain insect home
<i>Pitha:</i>	altar
<i>Pongal:</i>	south Indian sun and harvest festival which also honours the cow
<i>Pongal:</i>	rice boiled in milk with spices
<i>Prasad:</i>	offerings to the gods / blessed food / sacred food
<i>Puja:</i>	worship
<i>Puranas:</i>	ancient texts containing stories of the gods
<i>Puvidal:</i>	Malayalam term to describe the protective designs women create, often with flowers
<i>Radha:</i>	Krishna's consort
<i>Rama</i>	an incarnation of Vishnu. Believed to be king of Ayodhya
<i>Ramayana</i>	epic describing the life of Rama
<i>rangoli:</i>	Kannada term for women's protective decorative designs.
<i>Rashtriya Swayamsevak</i>	(RSS) the Hindu home troops, also known as the National
<i>Rg Veda:</i>	the earliest Hindu text
<i>Sadhu:</i>	holy man
<i>Sahmat:</i>	Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust is an alliance of artists and intellectuals opposed to Hindu fundamentalism and cultural nationalism
<i>Sakti Puja:</i>	a festival held in Bengal to celebrate the female principle in the form of the cow mother.
<i>Sanyassin</i>	one who renounces the world, mendicants
<i>Shaivite:</i>	follower of Shiva
<i>shakti:</i>	female energy / power
<i>Shiva:</i>	one of the main Hindu deities.
<i>shruti:</i>	that which is divinely revealed

<i>smriti:</i>	that which is remembered (Vedas)
<i>soubhagya:</i>	good fortune
<i>Sri:</i>	the goddess of good fortune
<i>sthala purana:</i>	temple legend
<i>Sudra:</i>	caste of farmers, labourers
<i>Surabhi:</i>	the cosmic cow
<i>Sutra:</i>	thread
<i>Tikka:</i>	a red dot applied to the forehead
<i>tulsi or tulasi:</i>	sacred basil plant (<i>Ocimum sanctum</i>)
<i>Uraeus:</i>	the rearing cobra, worn by pharaohs
<i>Vahana:</i>	vehicle. Each goddess / god is assigned a different animal which functions as a <i>vahana</i>
<i>Vaishya:</i>	caste of merchants, traders
<i>Varna:</i>	social classes, translated by the British as caste
<i>Vastupurusamandala:</i>	the outline of the cosmic man, the universal life force, the principle of all things within a <i>mandala</i> a sacred diagram Purusa is the Universal Essence, the Principle of all things, Vastu is the site
<i>Vibhuti:</i>	holy ash obtained by burning dung, milk, ghee and honey.
<i>Vishwa Hindu Parishad</i>	(VHP) the Hindu World Council, also known as the World Hindu Conference
<i>Vrata:</i>	woman's observance of a vow.
<i>Yaksha:</i>	nature deity
<i>Yantra:</i>	a sacred diagram

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Appendix I

Solo Exhibitions:

- 1993: Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore
 1993: Gallery Chemould, Bombay
 1989: Yelwala, Mysore
 1989: Gallery 7, Bombay
 1987: Venkatappa Art Gallery, Bangalore

Group exhibitions:

- 2004: 'Cabin Baggage,' a project by 'Open Circle' at the World Social Forum in Bombay.
 2003: 'Sites of Recurrence I,' Dakshina Chitra, Chennai
 'Sites of Recurrence II,' Boras Museum, Sweden
 Feb. – May 'How Latitudes become Form,' The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA
 'City Park' at 'Project,' Dublin, Ireland
 June – Sept. 'How Latitudes become Form,' Turin, Italy
 'Khoj 2003, International Workshop,' Bangalore.
 2002-2001: 'Moving Ideas.' Secular practice, Recent Art from India; travelling show: Gallery La Centrale, Montreal, Canada; Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada,
 2001: 'Art and Nature,' site-specific work in Bangalore, organized by the Goethe Institute.
 2001-2000: 'Drawing Space,' 3 Artists travelling show: Beaconsfield Gallery, London; Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, England.
 1999: 'Tales of Six Cities,' Lakeeren Gallery, Bombay.
 'Peep-Peep Bangalore,' Jayamaharal Palace, Bangalore.
 1998: 'Private Mythologies,' 8 artists from India, the Japan Foundation, Asia Centre, Tokyo, Japan.
 1997: 'Telling Tales,' 5 women artists from India, Victoria Gallery, Bath, England.
 1996: 'Traditions / Tensions,' 27 South Asian Artists, Asia society / Queens Museum, New York.
 1995: 'Art and Nature,' international workshop and exhibition, Buddha Jayanti Park, New Delhi
 'Africus,' South African Biennale, Johannesburg, South Africa.
 1989: 'Timeless Art,' Victoria Terminus, Bombay.
 1987: Two artists show, Gallery 7, Bombay
 1985: State Lalith Kala Academy annual exhibition
 1984: National Exhibition, New Delhi
 1982: State Lalith Kala Academy annual exhibition
 1981: State Lalith Kala Academy annual exhibition