[**St Valentine and the holy cow**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1737072/st-valentine-and-the-holy-cow)

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YOUNG lovers in India who felt doomed by the official fiat to hug a cow on Valentine’s Day instead of going out with their partners, were relieved by the quick reversal of the order. The rowing back did not, of course, imply that the original idea stood undermined. It’s just that it wouldn’t be expedient when the government was bracing to host the all-important and habitually curious G20 heads for it to showcase an Indian tool of social control.

It would be counterproductive if, instead of transmitting exalted ancient traditions to an errant new generation, the government found itself explaining to the invited heads the range of boons the cow brings to India. Consider another possibility: what if the Indian fiat of cow hug was unwittingly fulfilling the purpose claimed by Valentine’s Day, of bringing young hearts together?

An engaging story about Valentine’s Day is complex, and, in fact, distant, from those posited by both its opponents and supporters. In Egyptian mythology, in which the cow was worshipped as the goddess Hathor, protection was given to young lovers who sought her blessings. At the same time, the accepted story about the man called Valentine shows him as one among many Christians martyred by Roman kings, in his case in 270 AD on Feb 14, at the hands of Emperor Claudius, among the cruellest in the lineage.

The Christian priest was arrested, and while in custody, helped his jailer overcome an intractable crisis. He became the jailer’s friend, who introduced his young daughter to the special prisoner. The priest’s letter on the day of his execution to the girl was “from your Valentine”, or so the story goes. The preacher had shown several virtues, which fetched him the order of sainthood, hence St Valentine.

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For many reasons, the story could be deemed unworthy of being associated with the pining of young hearts today. Of course, there’s a commercial interest in shoring up the sentimental story. However, an absorbing legend associated with the Christian priest brings him closer to the idea of young love in an impishly devious way.

It seems that the cruelties of Claudius had made him totally unpopular with his own people. He requisitioned a strong new army to inflict more pain all around but found it difficult to enlist enough able-bodied men. Told that the young Romans were more attracted to the idea of settling down with a family instead of joining Claudius’s army, the emperor forbade future marriages and clamped down on young lovers, a method that seems akin to the ‘anti-Romeo’ vigilante squads once let loose by the celibate chief minister of Uttar Pradesh.

Valentine was very pleased with the young men’s refusal to join Claudius’s army, and he gave them all manner of help to meet and romance secretly. There is, of course, no way to ascertain the veracity of this lovely, subversive story. Also, it does seem odd that of the 365 days in a year, young hearts should flutter only on one assigned day to share flowers, send cards, and indulge in assorted revelries.

Return to Hathor, the cow goddess, who represented what ancient Egyptians saw loveable in the female identity. In some ways she carried in herself qualities associated with Indian deities in different avatars in the country and beyond. Hathor represented “fertility and motherhood, but also love, joy, music, the dance and all that was beautiful”, says one assessment of the legend.

There’s a vast difference though, between the way the current crop of right-wing nationalists propagate cow worship, and its worship in other cultures, of which there are legion. Hindutva’s militant assertion — that the cow was worshipped though its flesh was not eaten in ancient India — has been vehemently challenged by eminent historians, usually with textual and related evidence. In Egypt’s case, given that its people also were an agricultural lot, the cow was important for the milk it provided. But its meat, blood, horns and skin were also regarded as a boon with tradable value. The Egyptians thus interpreted it as a nurturing power, which Hathor provided for her people.

Historians and archaeologists have estimated that there were more girls named after Hathor than girls with any other name. Priests presiding over her worship could be both women and men.

Contrariness is not uncommon in deity worship anywhere. Perhaps because of her association with the evening, the cow goddess was also associated with death, and she is often found on the walls of tombs, welcoming the newly dead into the pleasant afterlife with food and drink.

India’s Durga is often worshipped in her avatar as the goddess Kali, bearing a red tongue, depicting the blood she drank from the invincible demon Raktabeej. Egyptian mythology has Hathor in a similar blood-curdling form. When men on earth plotted against the sun god Ra, who Hathor was variously mother and daughter to, she was enraged. Like a protective mother figure, Hathor set out to obliterate all those who opposed Ra, the king of the gods. The slaughter was so great that the higher gods intervened to stall the destruction of the human race. They flooded the Nile with red-coloured beer, resembling blood, which Hathor drank up greedily. She soon became intoxicated and passed out, ending the slaughter.

On the flipside, the invocation of Hathor was popular among those in search of love. This aspect of her is said to have prompted the Greeks to see in Hathor their avatar of Aphrodite. Cattle worship was common in practically every agrarian culture, China included. It was the Spanish gold-diggers that brought the cow to the Americas from Europe. Thus, the Mayan ceremony saw the ritual slaughter of deer and leopards, which they worshipped and ate. Some of them practised cannibalism too, but never ever lynched anyone, whether for loving or for eating what was deemed forbidden.

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*Published in Dawn, February 14th, 2023*