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Kamadhenu The Sacred Wish Fulfilling Cow

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*Namo Devyai Maha Devyai
Surabhyai Cha Namoh Namah|
Gavam Bheeja Swaroopaaya
Namaste Jagad Ambike||*

The above stotra is believed to have been Indra's prayer to the sacred Kamadhenu. Translated in English, means the following:

"Salutations to the great Goddess,
The One who fulfils devotees' wishes
The One who lived as a seed in all cows,
Salutations to Her, the Mother of the Universe"

Hinduism considers the "Gomata" or the cow as an utmost sacred symbol. Hindus from all parts of the country, belonging to all cultures and languages, believe in the worship of the cow. This is due to the fact that Hindus consider all cows as aspects of Mother Kamadhenu.

The name Kamadhenu came from the Sanskrit root, "Kamaduha", which literally means, "the cow of plenty" and "the one through whom all desires are fulfilled".

Kamadhenu is worshipped as the divine wish-fulfilling cow goddess, according to Hindu mythology. She is considered as the mother of all cows, as also of the eleven Rudras. This sacred, miraculous cow provides her owner anything at all that he or she ever desires.



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KAMADHENU

Various Names of Kamadhenu

Kamadhenu is referred to as Surabhi, which, loosely translated means "the Fragrant One". It could also mean the one with the pleasing, soothing smell. Generally, it could refer to the typical smell that cows emanate.

This deity is also sometimes referred to as Matrika, the Mother or the one who sets an Example.

Her other names include Sabala (the Spotted One) and Kapila (the Red One).

Birth of and Stories Relating to Kamadhenu



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SAMUDRA MANTHAN

There is no specific record about the birth of Kamadhenu. Different scriptures provide diverse versions of this phenomenon. However, it is vastly believed that the Divine Cow, Surabhi, emerged from the Samudra Manthan episode - during the time when the Milky Ocean was being churned. Hence, she is considered to be the offspring of the Devatas and the Asuras. She was then gifted to the Saptarishis, the great Sages. Brahma ordained that she should supply milk and ghee, to be used for sacred Yagnas (sacrificial rituals).

The Anushasana Parva states that Kamadhenu was the daughter of Daksha, the God who created the world. According to this, Surabhi was brought forth from the belch of Prajapati (the Creator) Daksha, after he drank the Amrita (Nectar of Immortality), which came forth from the Samudra Manthan. In due course of time, Surabhi gave birth to several golden cows, called Kapila cows. These cows were also regarded as the mothers of the world. Some versions narrate that Lord Brahma drank a bit too much of the Amrita and ended up vomiting a bit of it. Surabhi emerged from this nectarine fluid.

The Ramayana states that Surabhi is the daughter of sage Kashyapa and Krodhvasa, the daughter of Daksha. However, the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavata Purana consider Surabhi as the daughter of Daksha and the consort of sage Kashyapa, as also the mother of cows and buffalos.

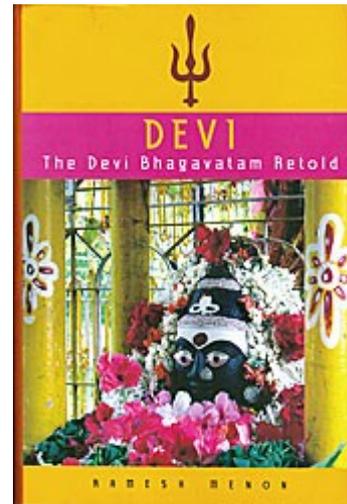
According to the Matsya Purana, Surabhi is the consort of Brahma and the mother of the cow Yogishwari, the eleven Rudras, goats, swans and certain species of animals. Generally, she is described as the mother of quadrupeds. According to yet another version, Surabhi is the mother of Amrita, cows, Brahmins and the Rudras.

Yet other scriptures claim that either or both the sages Jamadagni and Vasishtha kept the cow with them, in their hermitage, for a period of time. During this time, there were kings who tried to steal her from the sages and were severely punished for their acts, by Kamadhenu herself. In this version, Kamadhenu played an important role in the hermitage, providing milk and milk products for the sage. She also had the powers to produce fierce warriors to protect him.

In the Mahabharata and the Devi Bhagavata Purana, the cow, Nandini, is also referred to as Kamadhenu and is sometimes considered to be synonymous with Kamadhenu. At other times, Nandini is sometimes referred to as the daughter of Surabhi-Kamadhenu. According to Raghuvamsa of Kalidasa, king Dilip, an ancestor of Lord Rama, once failed to pay his respects to Kamadhenu when he happened to meet her. Angered, she cursed him that he would go childless all his life. Dilip's guru, sage Vasishtha, asked him to propitiate Nandini, Kamadhenu's daughter. Accordingly, Dilip and his wife served Nandini, who nullified her mother's curse and blessed them with a son, Raghu.

According to the Devi Bhagavata Purana, Krishna and Radha were enjoying each other's company one day, when they felt thirsty. Krishna created a cow, Surabhi and a calf, Manoratha, from the left side of his body. He then milked the cow, transferred it to a pot and proceeded to drink it. However, the pot fell to the ground and broke, spilling all the milk onto the ground. This milk became the Kshirasagara, the Ocean of Milk. Several cows miraculously emerged forth from Surabhi. Krishna gifted these cows to the Gopas, his shepherd-friends. Then, worshipping Surabhi, Krishna ordained that she would henceforth be considered the symbol of prosperity and would be worshipped on the occasion of Diwali.

Kamadhenu is believed to be dwelling in Goloka (the realm of cows) and also Patala (the Netherworld).



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**DEVI - THE DEVI BHAGAVATAM
RETOLD
by
RAMESH MENON**

Iconography of Kamadhenu



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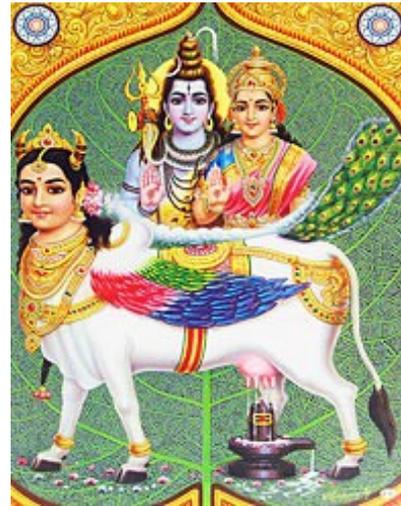
KAMADHENU

Kamadhenu is usually portrayed with the body of a cow and a female head, also with breasts. Sometimes, she is also shown as a spotlessly white cow, containing several deities within her physical structure.

Kamadhenu is regarded by Hindus as the source of all prosperity; verily as the Devi herself. She is also related to Prithvi or Mother Earth, who incidentally, is sometimes also described as the serene, all-enduring cow. To Hindus, the cow also represents purity, fertility, the ability to sustain human life and a selfless, sacrificing nature.

The four legs of the Kamadhenu embody the four Vedas and are considered to be as strong and enduring as the Himalayas. Her horns symbolize the Divine Trinity of Brahma at the tip, Vishnu in the middle part and Shiva at the base of the horn. In her eyes reside the sun and moon Gods. Agni, the God of Fire, and Vayu, the God of Wind, reside in her shoulders. In general, it is believed that all the major deities exist within the person of Kamadhenu. This is also how Kamadhenu is usually represented in portraits.

Another representation of Kamadhenu, which is slightly rarer, is that of a white Zebu cow. This version of Kamadhenu includes a woman's head, adorned with a crown; impressive-looking eagle wings and a peacock's tail. She is portrayed in this form in contemporary art.



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KAMADHENU



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**DATTATREYA WITH
KAMADHENU**

Lord Dattatreya is commonly depicted being accompanied by a cow, which is often identified with Kamadhenu. Sometimes, Dattatreya is shown holding the Divine Cow in one of his hands.

Kamadhenu is closely related with Brahminism, as against dogs, which are given a non-Brahminical aspect. She also embodies the Pancha Bhoota or the Five Elements.

Kamadhenu as the Protector of Brahmins

In Hinduism, Kamadhenu is usually associated with the highest priest class of Brahmins, sages included. She symbolizes their entire wealth, both material and spiritual, while also being a religious figure.

In Hindu tradition, cow's milk and its derivatives, especially, clarified butter or ghee, constitutes a vital part of Vedic Yagnas. These Yagnas are conducted by Brahmin priests and hence, Kamadhenu is sometimes also referred to the Homadhenu - the Homa is also a fire ritual. The cow hence takes a sacred form, as it is considered the source from who oblations are drawn and offered during the Yagna or Homa.

Kamadhenu provided milk and milk products for several sages and their families. Hence, she is seen as the one who nurtures Brahmins, offering them nourishing food for sustenance.

Kamadhenu protected her owner, sage Vasishtha, from the wrongdoings of abusive kings,

who tried to steal her away from him. She had the power to produce hordes of warriors to destroy the armies that came to attack the ashram (hermitage). Hence, she also became the symbol of protection of Brahmins.

How Kamadhenu Protects Jamadagni

Kamadhenu resided at sage Jamadagni's ashram for some time. According to the Mahabharata, the thousand-armed king of the Haihayas, Kartavirya Arjuna, severely damaged Jamadagni's ashram and captured Kamadhenu's calf.

In an effort to retrieve the calf, Jamadagni's son, Parashurama, fought and killed the king. The king's sons in turn killed Jamadagni. Greatly angered and seeking revenge, Parashurama destroyed the entire Kshatriya (warrior) race, 21 times over. His father was resurrected soon after Parashurama completed his terrible mission.

Many other treatises narrate a similar story regarding Kamadhenu's stay at sage Jamadagni's ashram. The Bhagavata Purana states that Kartavirya Arjuna abducted both Kamadhenu and her calf and Parashurama defeated and slew him and brought back the cow and her daughter to his father.



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PARASHURAMA

According to the Padma Purana, when Kartavirya Arjuna tried to capture Kamadhenu, she defeated his entire army and then flew away to the heavens. The king, angered and humiliated, killed Jamadagni.

According to the Brahmanda Purana, Kamadhenu used her immense powers to create a big city, in order to accommodate Kartavirya Arjuna's army, when they came to visit Jamadagni's ashram.

When they returned to their own kingdom, Kartavirya Arjuna's minister, Chandragupta, persuaded him to capture the divine cow. The minister returned to the ashram and requested the sage to hand over the cow to them. However, Jamadagni flatly refused to do so. The minister then tried to take away the cow by force. In the fight that followed, the sage got killed and Kamadhenu escaped to the skies. However, Chandragupta managed to get hold of her calf.

The Brahma Vaivarta Purana, which refers to the cow as Kapila, states that she produced a vast army and a variety of weapons to help Jamadagni defeat the king's army. Kapila also instructed her master in the martial arts. Using her powers, she defeated the entire enemy several times, sparing the life of the king each time. However, the king used the divine spear given to him by Dattatreya to kill Jamadagni.

Kamadhenu and Vasishtha

The Ramayana relates a story similar to the above. However, the sage here is Vasishtha and the king, Vishwamitra. Once, when Vishwamitra arrived at Vasishtha's ashram along with his army, the sage welcomed him and offered an impressive banquet to all of them. This elaborate meal was created by Kamadhenu, who was then referred to as Sabala.

Amazed by Sabala's powers, the king asked the sage to hand her over to him, in exchange for a thousand ordinary cows, horses, elephants, gold and money. Vasishtha, however, refused to part with Sabala. The king tried to take her with him by force, but

Sabala fought back and returned to her master. At Vasishtha's order, she produced Pahlava warriors, who destroyed Vishwamitra's entire army.

Thus, Sabala produced the entire lineage of Shaka-Yavana warriors. The Kambhojas emerged from her mouth and the Barvaras came from her udder. The Yavanas and Shakas came from her hind and the Haritas, Kiratas and other warriors emerged forth from the pores of her skin.

Sabala's army also killed all the sons of Vishwamitra. This incident led to a great enmity between Vasishtha and Vishwamitra. Smarting from the humiliation, Vishwamitra renounced his kingdom in order to become a great sage; and proceeded to undertake severe penance, so as to defeat Vasishtha with his powers.

Abodes of Kamadhenu

Different scriptures give different accounts of Kamadhenu's residence. The Anushasana Parva of the Mahabharata states that Surabhi, the daughter of Daksha, worshipped Brahma for 10,000 years. Pleased with her devotion, the Lord blessed her, granting her Goddess status, decreeing that she and her children would henceforth be worshipped by all on earth. She was also given an entire world to rule. Thus, she rules Goloka, which is the cow-heaven, beyond the three worlds. Her daughters reside on earth, co-existing along with human beings.

The Ramayana describes Surabhi as living in the city of Varuna, the Lord of the Oceans. This city is believed to be situated in Patala. The sweet milk she produced is believed to have created the Kshirasagara, the Ocean of Milk.

The Udyoga Parva of the Mahabharata states that the milk had 6 different flavours and was the most nourishing thing you could ever find. This Parva also narrates that Surabhi resides in the Patala, along with her four daughters, the Dikpalis, or the guardians of the cow goddesses. Sauabhi guards the East; Harshika, the South; Subhadra, the West; and Dhenu, the North.

Some texts aver that though there could have been one Kamadhenu, all of them were incarnations of the original Kamadhenu, who is the mother of all cows.

Other References to Kamadhenu-Surabhi

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna refers to Kamadhenu as Kamadhuk. He also declares here that among cows, he is the Kamadhuk.

The Skanda Purana relates that Lord Shiva once cast a curse on Surabhi. Once, Brahma and Vishnu were debating over which among them was superior. At that time, a gigantic and fiery linga emerged before them. They then decided that whoever found the end of this pillar would be considered superior. Brahma flew to the heavens in order to try to find the top of the pillar, but sadly, failed in the attempt. Brahma then ordered Surabhi to falsely testify to Vishnu that Brahma had seen the top of the linga. Angered by Surabhi's lie, Shiva cursed her so that her bovine offspring would have to eat unholy substances.

Worship of Kamadhenu

Unlike the other goddesses of Hinduism, Kamadhenu has never been worshipped as an independent deity, nor does she have temples exclusively dedicated to her. Hindus believe that the best and most effective way to worship Kamadhenu is to venerate and respect all cows in general.

Hence, cows are worshipped and are often fed outside temples, especially on Fridays and on all special occasions as well. All cows are generally considered incarnations of

Kamadhenu by pious Hindus the world over.

Kamadhenu Tantra

In Tantra Shastra, the Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling cow, is considered as a form of Saraswati Devi. This deity rules knowledge, speech, words, eloquence, music and the Arts. She is also represented as one of the Shaktis and is the Divine Consort of Brahma.

The Kamadhenu Tantra in itself is a question-answer session between Parvati (Shakti) and Shiva. Parvati queries Shiva about the true significance of the 50 letters of the Sanskrit alphabet - about their relationship with the tattvas.

This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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