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Crowded India Cities Face Conflict on Cows

By DAVID GUTTENFELDER, Associated Press Writer *Sat May 14, 8:35 PM ET*

NEW DELHI - In largely Hindu India, where many animals are revered as sacred, the cow has always held a special place.

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"If someone were to ask me what the most important outward manifestation of Hinduism was, I would suggest that it was the idea of cow

protection," Mohandas K. Gandhi, India's great teacher of nonviolence, once wrote.

But as urban India grows more crowded, cattle are an increasing problem.

In New Delhi, which 13 million people share with an estimated 28,000 cows, the problems are legion: Wandering cows clog streets and cause road accidents. Herds of cows spread trash and disease as they tear open plastic garbage bags in search of food and leave trails of dung. They sometimes trample people to death.

So in early May, the New Delhi high court ordered the removal of stray cattle from the city's streets.

Fanning out across the capital, city workers backed by riot police began roping and hauling cows off in trucks to a suburban pound. Some people applauded. Others, who venerate the cows or make their livelihood by milking the stray animals at unregistered dairies, protested.

Days after the roundup began, cows could still be seen all across the city.

Gentle respect for the lives of all animals has been a principle belief of Hinduism since its emergence some three milleniums ago.

But the sacred cow has a special role in Hindu mythology. Some trace cow worship back to Lord Krishna, who is said to have first appeared as a cowherd and protector of cattle. Several other gods also lived for a time as cows, and the animals remain a powerful symbol of the religion.

Hindu nationalist political parties have often used cows to further their political goals, and one raises money by making traditional medicines and cosmetics from key cow products — butter, milk, curd, urine and dung.

Cows are also protected by law in India.

Free-roaming cattle share public spaces with humans. They loiter in the entries of Hindu temples, nap on the medians of highways and mingle among vendors in city markets.

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