



(AP Photo/Bernat Armangue)

An Indian man carries milk canisters outside of a train station in New Delhi, India.

At 4:30 AM, the New Delhi train station is already bustling with milkmen from surrounding towns, who arrive carrying cans of milk that they deliver to neighborhoods across the capital. Some will make a second trip before the day ends. And then they will return to feed the cattle that in turn help feed their families.

It is the world's largest maker of milk and also the largest buyer. And there is a good reason. In India milk is not just the morning glass you drink before you leave the house. Its uses go far beyond the dietary and nutritional. India was producing 140 million metric tons of milk per year by the end of 2014. That is about 50 percent more than the United States. The U.S. is the second-biggest maker of milk.

Milk's special importance in India goes back to Hindu mythology. It includes the legend of the Samudra manthan. And also the churning of the ocean that brought forth the drink of immortality, the amrit.

It also includes the goddess Kamdhenu. The goddess manifested itself as a wish-granting divine cow. Hindus consider cows to be sacred embodiments of Kamdhenu. They make up 81 percent of India's 1.3 billion people.

Krishna worshippers have special love for cows. The Hindu god's role as a cowherd. Stories about his love of butter are legendary. He is lovingly called "Makhan chor." This means, "butter thief."

Hindus use milk and its products for religious purposes because it is believed to have purifying qualities. Ghee is clarified butter. It is used in lamps for rituals. Milk is used to bathe Hindu idols on special occasions. Sweets made from milk or ghee are used as offerings to gods. It goes with so much of Hindu life. It is included in rituals from an infant's first food to the last rituals after death.

Milk also goes beyond religion. Ghee spread on flatbread can be a special treat for the poor. Buttermilk is a popular summer drink to soothe the stomach. In India you cannot escape calorie-filled sweets made with milk. Another thing common is the morning cup of milky tea. Tiny tea stalls start their businesses early. They often serve migrant laborers.

The dairy industry became the force it is today because of major changes decades ago. Amul is a co-operative dairy. It was born in 1946. It came from a revolt by milk makers against unfair trade practices.

It now has 3.37 million members. Amul was a model for Operation Flood. That was a nationwide campaign to increase milk production. It began in 1970.

Many dairy operations are quite small. In a rural corner of India's northeastern Indian state of Assam, 24-year-old Srimoti Mandal milks her three cows in the early morning. She gets an average of about 6 liters per day. She sells it for about \$3.50. Her husband is unable to work because of asthma. She depends on the milk to support her family of four.

Source: adapted from [Smithsonian Jr.](#)