

Introduction

Animals, Ethics, and Enchantment in South Asia and the Middle East

Manan Ahmed Asif and Anand Vivek Taneja

In Lahore's Cantonment district, in the mid-1980s, a lonely stretch of road connected Sadr Bazaar to Murgi Khana. The one-lane road cut through farm and dairy land—a large Muslim cemetery on the west end and an old Christian cemetery on the east. The horse carriages (*tonga*) that operated that stretch stopped after the maghrib prayers. Chacha Nai' ("Uncle Barber")—actual name, Akbar—was born in Ghazipur, which abuts Murgi Khana. He is roughly seventy years old, and his stories are mostly about people long gone (*puranay banday*)—he drops their names as if they will walk up to him any second. Chacha Nai' operates a one-seat barber station under the bald fir tree at the northern edge of Murgi Khana. His customers have always stepped off the *tonga* from Sadr Bazaar. He speaks about the *chalawa* (poltergeist) who haunted that road, luring young men off the *tonga*. A typical story went such that a young man would be bicycling or walking home after dark and would come across a baby goat (or lamb, or calf) in the middle of the street. The young man would pick up the small animal to take home and start either carrying it or dragging it behind him. As he would continue his journey, he would find the animal getting heavier and heavier—such that he would no longer be able to walk or pedal. It is only then, in the narrative, that the young man would look down to the animal and find that it had legs elongated over six feet or a head as big as a grown animal. In fright, the young man would drop the animal and run—only to be chased by the cackling poltergeist. In these narratives the young men would go into a fever for days and upon recovery tell with breathless detail of the attack of the animal.

I used to walk from Sadr to Murgi Khana. It was so nice. Green and lush. The tonga drivers all hailed from Patauki so they would wrap up their business early to go home. I never was afraid of walking. I heard only once that a boy from a Ghazipur family peed on a teli [mound] and had a saiyā [possession] and died but that was rare. There were a lot of stories. Chalawa were there but one knew that such animals, alone at night, should be respected, not abducted. It was only the greedy who got into trouble. Now it is afsar shahi [military rule] time—they stole all the land. Those farms are gone, you know. I have not heard of any chalawa in twenty years. I do hear about some vardatān [robberies] but they attack them [local families] in the houses.¹

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1. Chacha Nai', interview with Manan Ahmed Asif, January 12, 2014, Lahore.

The land is indeed gone. In the late 1990s, the military purchased all of the land in eastern Lahore to distribute among its officers, who sold it for profit in the private sector. A series of housing colonies (called Askari I, II . . . X, XI, or Defense I, II . . . X) stretch far from Sadr Bazaar into the Punjabi plains. The environmental damage—eradication of dairy land, of farm land, of natural groves—is profound and severe. Where Chacha Nai' walked now exist only cement houses with Mashallah tiles on the front of each two-story house. The disappearance of the chalawa is also the disappearance of the small goat, the small calf, the small lamb. It is also the disappearance of the dairy land and the farm land. The oral history of Chacha Nai' links the disappearance of wooded and agricultural land with the disappearances of stories of poltergeists. Such histories, and their relationship to contested practices of urbanity, recur often in the collection of articles in this issue.

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In contradistinction to the Kantian argument that separates humans from animals, there is a deep human past where the boundaries of animals and humans are not so clearly or easily defined—or are deliberately erased—in ways that are deeply productive for thinking about ethical questions. What does it mean to live with others? What does it mean to share your world with other humans who are unlike you? Or animals who are unlike you? Wendy Doniger's pioneering body of work demonstrates that animals have played a central role in thinking about such questions in Vedic ritual and Sanskrit literature.² The ethnographic bent of many of the essays in this special section demonstrates how the copresence of animal and human beings continues to make everyday life in South Asia a site of embodied philosophical engagement with questions regarding the bounds of self and community and our ethics toward others. The Vedic ambivalence about animal sacrifice continues to find resonance in ethical dilemmas about cruelty to animals in contemporary rural India.

Translocated monkeys in the Uttarakhand hills are attributed with the malevolent political agency of the central government in ways that are reminiscent of the monkeys in the Ramayana, who serve as complex psychological shadows to the human protagonists.³ The attribution of religion to animals in medieval Islamic texts finds an apt resonance in contemporary India,⁴ where birds and animals are recognized as Muslim saints, moral exemplars for their human devotees.

We turn to these rich traditions, both textual and embodied, to confound and erase the sharp boundaries between the human, the animal, and the environment that have been, and continue to be, sites of incredible violence. The question of who gets the privilege to be considered a human is not an idle question. Animality is a constitutive part of the discursive terrain that marks out which life matters and which life can be erased. In the philosophy, most prominently, of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel where native and African bodies become subhuman and marked for erasure, or in the early twentieth-century dominance of social Darwinism that informed miscegenation and eugenic laws, the violence directed toward racialized minorities hinged on creating rigid distinctions among the animal, the human, and nature. By turning to the lives of animals, and situating them in specific spaces of moral agency and moral thought, the essays in this section hope to open up the limits and possibilities of what it means to be human.

In doing so, these essays build upon long established strains in South Asian scholarship that highlight a different spectrum of an ethical relationship between humans and animals. Wendy Doniger has demonstrated the ambivalence in the Vedic tradition about hunting, animal sacrifice, and the consumption of meat. Veena Das has argued that the figure of the sacrificial animal is a site of contemplation that underscores the inevitable cost of living and emphasizes the contamination of everyday life by violence toward other sentient beings such as animals and insects, as well as plants and microbes.⁵ In the works of these

2. See Doniger, "Zoomorphism," and Doniger, *The Hindus*.

3. See Doniger, *The Hindus*, 20–23.

4. See Ikhwan al-Safa, *Case of the Animals versus Man*.

5. See Das, "Being Together with Animals."

scholars, noncruelty (*anrhamasya*) toward animals emerges as a high moral virtue. King Yudhishtir, at the end of the Mahabharata, refuses to go to heaven without the dog who one day, for no (humanly) apparent reason, started accompanying him and his wife and four brothers on their arduous journey through the Himalayas. The *anrhamasya* or noncruelty that Yudhishtir demonstrates, according to Das, is a radical expansion of the Kantian categorical imperative.⁶ It is not just humans but all creatures who are to be treated as ends in themselves, and not means. The obligations of companionship, even for those brought together by sheer contingency, do not end with the conclusion of the journey.

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The story of the chalawa from Lahore, too, is a story about noncruelty: Does it not articulate the moral imperative not to treat small animals as a means to an ends, to respect them and not abduct them? But this morality is not purely abstract but is intimately tied to a physical landscape, a landscape of the dense interconnection of humans with goats, and fields, and trees. What happens, then, to the moral landscape with the transformation of the physical landscape, the transformation of the spaces and the circumstances in which humans and animals interact? The essays in this special section, from their different disciplinary and regional standpoints, all address the questions of both the transformations and continuities of human-animal interactions and the ways in which these affect questions of human ethics.

They collectively assert that animals act not merely as moral agents but as moral exemplars. This is not a story unique to India or the Middle East, however. As philosopher Alphonso Lingis has argued, our virtues and our moral imperatives arise not from the rational calculation of an imperative, or theological concepts of an afterlife, but from the emotions that arise within us, emotions that we share in common with animals. And it is animals as ethical exemplars, Lingis contends, contra Kant, that constantly remind us of the mo-

rality of our own emotions.⁷ The essays then demonstrate how the morality of humans is contingent upon the lives of animals and the stories of their disappearances.

Naisargi Dave and Bhrigupati Singh's essay in this issue turns to the varying moods that accompany the killing of animals in contemporary India. In their essay, which moves from the ambivalence around animal sacrifice in a traditional village to the industrialized mass killing of chickens in a modern slaughterhouse, they show that the question of how to kill is linked to the question of how to live, and what it means to be alive in contemporary India.

The chalawa's terrifying supernatural turn alerts us to the ways in which the realm of superstition—enchantment—articulates potentialities otherwise unspoken or latent.⁸ In the enchanted landscape of Lahore, vanished in the face of the Cartesian gridding and parceling of the land, the animal acted as a moral agent. Here, the ethical question shifts from what we do to animals to what animals do to us. A dominant theme connecting the essays in this section is one of animals as highly complex moral agents, a theme that definitively unsettles the hierarchical boundaries of human and animal. Richard McGregor's essay looks at the religion of animals in medieval texts from Turkey and Iraq to challenge the post-Enlightenment idea of religion as an exclusively human attribute. In his reading of the Ikhwan al-Safa's famous *Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn*, McGregor shows how the recognition of the religiosity of animals, while profoundly different from human religiosity, is a profound gesture of openness that points beyond the exclusivity of communitarianism and egocentric limitations of religion and selfhood.

This openness toward the animal as a fellow moral agent continues to inform everyday life in South Asia, where in Uttarakhand, animals do not just have religion, they participate in politics, too. Radhika Govindarajan's essay traces the encounters of people with "outsider" monkeys transferred from Delhi to the hills of Uttarakhand, and she reveals how these encounters perform the politics of

6. See *ibid.*

7. See Lingis, "Bestiality."

8. See Chakrabarty, "The Power of Superstition."

center and periphery, insider and outsider—forms of politics usually taken to be entirely human.

Rachel Dwyer's essay follows the "elephantness" of Ganesha through scripture, popular iconography, and film to ask how the elephant-headed god has become the patron deity of ever more densely human Bombay/Mumbai. Dwyer finds parallels between the liminality of Ganesha, between human and animal, and the liminality of Ganesha devotion—Ganesha is an icon of Maratha nationalism, linked to the heartland of Peshwa rule, and yet he is also a deity whose appeal crosses regional and even religious divides in a cosmopolitan city.

Anand Vivek Taneja's essay looks at the Islamic and Hindu sanctification of animals in contemporary Delhi and rural Uttar Pradesh, and the ways in which this sanctification casts light on the shifting ecologies of north India. The intensified sanctity of animals, Taneja finds, seems to occur in settings where animals are disappearing—a result of either extinction or the overwhelming human crowding and infrastructural development of cities. The growing sacredness of animal life in these spaces both remembers and performs a time when human and animal worlds were in a much closer communion than they are now.

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In Delhi in the late 1970s, a ruin long abandoned was restituted as a place for prayer. Those who went to Firoz Shah Kotla to pray in those early days remember that there would be snakes lying on the steps of the mosque, who would slither apart to make room for the congregants. Mohammad Soualaheen, member of the organizing committee of the mosque at Firoz Shah Kotla,⁹ remembers there were no floodlights back then on the Ring Road (which runs just to the east of the mosque), and on winter nights during Ramzan, it would be so dark that people couldn't see their hands in front of their faces when they raised them for worship. In his nostalgic retelling of what Firoz Shah Kotla used to be like in the "good old days," the spiritual charge of the place came from its being an ecological frontier in the heart of the city, a

space where humans walked among snakes without fear, and where the darkness that enveloped worshippers was primordial and pure, a thing of awe and wonder, unlike the light-polluted nights of contemporary Delhi.

The story of Firoz Shah Kotla is both nostalgic and subjunctive. Nostalgic because it points toward a bygone Delhi, where the sacred geography of the city was characterized by much closer relations among humans, animals, plants, and flowing water; subjunctive because it imagines a world "as if," a world where humans recognize not their separation from but their inclusion among other animals.

It is as good a philosophical image as any of a world that could still be possible. ■■■■

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9. Mohammad Soualaheen, interview with Anand Vivek Taneja, September 18, 2014, New Delhi.