

Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas

by Radhika Govindrajan. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. xiii, 220 pp., ISBN 9780226559988.

Reviewed by Nicolas Lainé

With *Animal Intimacies*, Radhika Govindrajan immerses us in passionate case studies on the multiple relationships between Kumaoni villagers and animals in Uttarakhand (India). To do this, she discusses the recent but now well-established body of works dealing with the more-than-human approach in anthropology (Ingold 2000) to which she offers a gender perspective. Throughout the volume, the author engages with the notion of relatedness, a notion that helps to go beyond the relationship between two living beings, and which encapsulates the '*multispecies family*' (p. 3). Thus, relatedness not only credits animals with intention and agency but also projects the reader into the heart of the daily intimacy that villagers share with them in Kumaon. Indeed, relatedness carries a powerful heuristic value within each of the narratives the volume discusses.

The book's five case studies feature goats, cows, monkeys, wild boars, leopards and pigs. While each of these narratives has much to say about Kumaoni villagers, they also provide insightful views on the current challenges the Indian subcontinent has faced in recent years and is indeed still facing. Through an attentive study of the complex relationship with animals, Govindrajan deconstructs often obvious arguments or discourses on crucial societal and ecological stakes at play in contemporary India, and offers an alternative view of these discourses from the perspective of daily life in Kumaon. Villagers' relationships with animals help Govindrajan offer fresh insights into caste, gender and identity. These are much-needed alternatives, notably in the country's current context of rampant Hindu nationalism.

Following the Introduction, Chapter 2 deals with the question of sacrifice and the inextricable link between the officiant, the sacrificed animal and the receiver of the sacrifice (deity). Govindrajan's analysis goes beyond a simplistic image of sacrifice that is limited to the killing of

an animal – a practice surprisingly questioned today by both right-wing Hindu nationalists and animal activists – to encompass the relationship between human and non-human bodies, and the way these are played out in ‘lived material relation’ (p. 39) long before the actual offering takes place. It is women in particular who, by raising goats like their own children, enact a contract with the animal and acquire the debt of the gift of the animal; a phenomenon that echoes the relationship between breeders and animals in France, which is well documented by Porcher (2017).

Chapter 3 shows how understanding daily relationships with cows helps to counter recent attempts by right-wing nationalists to unite Hindu populations under the symbolism of *gau-mata* as mother of the nation, and to exclude Muslim and Christian communities. However, locally, villagers are more attentive to the conduct and behaviour of imported Jersey cows as opposed to their hill-dwelling cows. For them, Jersey cows do not have the same capacity to participate actively in their ritual and social lives as local cows do, making political attempts to laud the imported cows nonsensical in Kumaoni villagers’ eyes.

Chapter 4 deals with the cohabitation of Kumaoni villagers with certain monkeys that cause damage and strike fear in the human population. For locals who are used to cohabiting with *pahari* monkeys (mountain monkeys), their particular trauma is blamed on monkeys translocated from cities. Again, relatedness is highly significant in marking this distinction. According to villagers, because translocated monkeys’ habits are akin to those of ‘*city folk*’, they ‘did not know how to behave in villages’ (p. 100). The chapter is well informed by the history of city macaques in India as well as by primatological research on their behaviour, but it is the local viewpoint that is foregrounded throughout. While villagers know how to negotiate with *pahari* monkeys, with whom they share a sense of belonging, ‘outsiders’ are described and experienced as aggressive and criminal in behaviour. Differing from mountain monkeys even in their choice of food, translocated simians serve as metaphors, for Kumaoni villagers, to express the attitudes and intentions of urban- and plain-dwelling people towards them.

The well-known narrative about a sow that escaped in colonial times and the subsequent proliferation of wild pig in the area launches a discussion on wild versus domestic in Chapter 5. The sow’s initial

escape came from a renowned colonial institution (Indian Veterinary Research Institute) that imposed and still represents control of both land and people in the area. For local people, even though this building and its compounds lie in ruins, the latter still embody the colonial past, including its domination-based relations and configurations of land and space. However, this chapter is not only a discussion of the construction of wild, domestic and inbetween spaces. As a result of its 'fetishization' (p. 127), which began in colonial times, Govindrajan demonstrates how the notion of wilderness (and nature conservation) is closely related to notions of race, sexuality and gender. Their control is always a matter of power, domination and caste. Indeed, while the upper class would prefer to eat wild pig, the lower class – equated with dirtiness and impurity – is associated with domestic pigs.

Chapter 6 deals with labour organisation in Kumaon and particularly with what the work performed by women with farm animals and the work of collecting fodder in forests says about genderisation and patriarchy in rural Uttarakhand and, more broadly, in Indian society. In their daily work in the forest, women encounter wild bears. The author uses narratives of these encounters to discuss gender and patriarchy. For example, when women tell of being kidnapped by male bears and of eventually having sexual relations with them, the author points to the transgressive imaginary of these encounters as a way to reverse the dominant patriarchal hierarchy where women must behave as 'good wives' according to orthodox Hindu conceptions.

Throughout the volume, we follow the daily lives shared by humans and animals in Kumaon. However, Govindrajan does not forget to question her own relationship with both of them by way of constant reflexivity. Thus, the wealth of each of the narratives presented in the volume lies not only in its meticulous description and illuminating analysis, but even more so in the author's concern for honesty, rigour and lucidity. Govindrajan's complex description of intertwined relationships in no way concedes to a form of 'simplistic' Manicheism. Or to put it another way, Govindrajan demonstrates her ability to 'stay with the trouble', as described by Donna Haraway (2016), an author she widely and quite rightly refers to throughout the book: 'trouble' here being understood each time as situations marked by contradictions, even strong contradictions.

In addition, Govindrajan's analyses demonstrate the excessive generalisation of animals as uniformly represented and behaving species, which reflects the current 'biologisation' of the social that our contemporary societies are experiencing. She shows that many singular beings (human/nonhuman) weave complex relationships with just as many other individual ones.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, one of the other strengths of this rich, intellectual work is that it deals with the main challenges facing contemporary India: the question of the place of religion, the rights of marginal populations (including gender and caste groups), colonial heritage and nature conservation. To counter conventional ideas or ready-made arguments, Govindrajan never overlooks the historical dimension of her case studies, demonstrating that they do not derive from a newly discovered fact but rather stem from long sociopolitical processes that encompass aspects other than the situation studied in isolation. Thus, in addition to being of great interest for those curious about human-animal relationships, the volume is to be highly recommended to South Asia scholars, conservationists, as well as those interested in Indian politics in general.

References

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