Govindrajan, Radhika. Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalayas. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press. 2018. xiii, 220 pages. ISBN: 9780226559988. $27.50 (paperback).

**Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalayas**

Radhika Govindrajan’s book *Animal Intimacies* portrays a world of people whose lives are closely linked to animals (wild, semi-wild, domesticated) in India’s Central Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. The entangled lives of humans and animals unfolds in a series of six chapters. Each chapter focuses on a particular animal/s (sacrificial goats, holy and jersey cows, rowdy monkeys, wild/non-wild pigs, bears, and about leopard-dog conflicts).

Radhika Govindrajan demonstrates the multiple ways through which people’s lives are interconnected with the lives of animals who share food, myths, and landscape, highlighting conflicts, cooperation and concern of the people towards animals. Her book is rich in ethnographic accounts that bring out the emotional connection between people and the animals they rear. For example, Munni, a widow who refused to leave the sick jersey cow; Radha who insisted on staying in the ruined shed after a heavy monsoon night, to protect the cow from a leopard attack. There are many such examples spread across all chapters about overlapping of emotions, love and care exhibited, not only by local residents towards animals but also between individual animals.

Govindrajan asks what it means to live a life that is densely knotted with the non-human entities. The goal in this book is not just speaking about animals as symbols and keeping animals on the periphery of human stories, but to highlight a deep sense of relatedness between humans and non-humans. By drawing on concepts such as relatedness from Carsten (2000) and Harraway’s ideas on companion species (2003), this author extends kin-making beyond the human. Govindrajan pushes the definition of relatedness to non-humans, not just through the notions of care and love but also as being indifferent, as a form of disgust or hostility. The book adequately demonstrates the daily intimacy of care, the notion of inclusion/exclusion, a sense of belonging, identity, and affective labour that help the readers in understanding multispecies relatedness.

In the chapter on goats, interestingly titled, ‘The goat who died for the family: Sacrificial ethics and kinship’ Govindrajan writes about the everyday forms of connections and interactions between humans and goats, as these animals become sacrificial offerings to Gods. In Uttarakhand, goats are precious animals raised with care and labour, and this contradictory relatedness is tied to the notion of devotion of humans to *devi-dyavta* (God and Goddess). Through the lives of women carers, the chapter shows how goats become a medium to strengthen their bond with the deity in the form of what the author calls ‘sacrifice as relatedness’ (pg. 37). While the sacrifice is seen as a ritual activity by some, it has become a point of contestation between the villagers and urban dwellers, who feel that this ‘sacred’ sacrifice is a barbaric act and a ‘backward’ practice. For the women who raised the goats, the animals are like their children nurtured with care, gendered labour and *mamata* (maternal love) but, these sentiments are not shared by those who visit their ancestral villages from towns and other non-rural settings. The objections to animal sacrifice also come from the animal rights activists and Hindu-right wing groups.

The following chapter ‘The cow herself has changed: Hindu Nationalism, cow protection and Bovine materiality’ carries an exciting account of the attempts by the Hindu Nationalist party to unify all Hindus in the name of cow protection using the symbol of the holy mother cow. As an exclusionary project against Muslims, Dalits, and Christians, sacredness attached to cow become a coercive way in which the Hindu reformist groups try to impose kinship between humans and cows. These impositions were not taken well by the native residents because the metaphor of cow mother (*gau-mata*) of the Hindu nationalists is unable to address the different degrees of ritual significance attached to cow breeds by the local villagers. Jersey cows are not considered as ritually powerful as compared to the *pahari cows* because they are not of the mountains and are foreign cows.

Similarly, the arrival of monkeys from the city causes considerable damage to the villagers. The politics of belonging played out leading to discussions on insider/outsider debate through the narratives highlights the monkey problem. The chapter ‘Outsider monkey, insider monkey: On the politics of exclusion and belonging’ offers great insights into how certain beings are claimed as kin, while others are branded as ‘enemies’ or ‘criminals’. Keeping the focus on monkeys, the chapter analyses how questions of who belongs to a community or a nation are framed, as villagers claim kinship with *pahari* monkeys but the ‘outsider’ monkeys are seen as thieves. The ‘outsider’ monkeys become metaphors about anxieties of displacement and claiming of resources by people from the plains.

The idea of wildness is effectively explored in the story of the runaway sow focussing on the debates about wildness, a concept that is crucial in the conservation of wildlife in India. These spaces are imagined as pristine, empty, and non-human landscapes and animals inhabiting these spaces known to carry degrees of wildness. The chapter ‘Pig gone wild: Colonialism, conservation, and the other wild’ is a commentary on the state’s obsession with the specific spaces, certain animals
as wild and therefore, justifying their protection from local people, who are often branded as unruly and disobedient of the state conservation rules. What is very interesting is that the conceptions of wildness are demonstrated through the story of pigs, whose bodies carry ‘layers of sedimented meanings’ of wildness across species (pg. 136). It is interesting to note that the degree of wildness of animals are also linked to caste domination, as the chapter shows the upper caste villagers distance themselves from the lower castes through a politics of disgust and construct the low caste as jungli (wild), dirty, and uncivil.

The book takes the reader to a new set of issues in the chapter on queer relations between bears and women in the chapter ‘The bear who loved a woman’. The transgressive desires of women and the accounts of sexual fantasies narrated by women reflect not only gender hierarchies but also anthropocentric hierarchies of humans and non-humans. For example, women’s stories of bears taking them into the caves and having sex with them is a way of ridiculing or shaming their husband’s lack of sexual capacity, and also serve as forms of subversion of patriarchy.

Ethnographic studies of human-non-human relations from India and the South Asian context are rare; therefore, this book adds to the newly emerging field of multispecies ethnography. The book is both conceptually and empirically sound, with the lives of both animals and humans written with sensitivity and reflectivity. The strength of the book lies in the intricate weaving of the concept of relatedness from an interspecies perspective, through notions of kinship, politics, violence, gender and queerness, love and care that occurs between human and non-human animals. Scholars of human-animal relations, animal studies, wildlife conservation, cultural anthropology, himalayan studies, south asian scholars, hinduism, gender and sexuality, environmental anthropology, and ethnographers, in general, will find this book extremely valuable.

There are scholars, especially from wildlife sciences or those studying animals from the field of biological sciences, who may not agree with anthropomorphising animals and giving agency and intentions to nonhumans; as they tend to have an unemotional and detached approach to the ‘animal’ subjects they are studying. This is the challenge of interdisciplinarity, particularly in the field of multispecies ethnography. Perhaps, that is what Govindrajan’s book shows. That a clear divide between humans and nonhumans could be too reductive and that human’s lives are deeply connected with nonhumans through multiple ways and sometimes, a whole new world of nonhumans emerges when we step away from human-centric worldview.

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