

Other than Human

Rethinking Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia: An Introduction

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Thanks to the posthumanist turn, theoretical work in the humanities and social sciences has been endeavoring for some time to imagine the shared ecologies of varied life-forms (and nonliving forms) with differing ontologies. This has meant going beyond the traditional human subject, the master work of what Giorgio Agamben has described as an anthropological machine centered on divisions between human/animal, mind/body, subject/object, society/nature, active/passive, sameness/difference, secular/religious, and inclusion/exclusion.¹ In contrast to these antagonistic dualisms (and human exceptionalism) that are deeply embedded in our intellectual traditions and epistemologies, Donna Haraway, for instance, offers a theory of “natureculture,” which is predicated upon an ecology of companion species in “entangled” and “knotted” relationship rather than ranged in a Great Chain of Being.² That such entanglements, knottings, and constellations constitute a multiscalar process in terms of their geographies and histories has been argued by Jason W. Moore, who has suggested that capitalist civilization, starting in the sixteenth century, must be understood as an irreducibly ecological regime in which biophysical worlds are braided together with social ones.³ At a more expansive ecological scale, scholars in the environmental humanities have analyzed the ways in which the biophysical world or planetary necessity has impinged upon human poiesis, leaving a mark in material as well as symbolic domains. In *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*, Sugata Ray maps such connections among climatic variability, historical eventfulness, theology, and aesthetic practice. He persuasively reads changes in the Vaishnava liturgy of early modern Braj as a response to the global climatic upheavals of the Little Ice Age (1550–1850), which was experienced in South Asia (as well as in the Caribbean, northeast Brazil, parts of West Africa, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Southeast Asia) as an epoch of droughts, monsoon failures, and deforestation.⁴ A new set of intensely topophilic, liturgical, and art practices emerged, Ray contends, from “a reciprocal relationship between an aesthetics of venerating the natural environment and ecological catastrophes.”⁵

In several notable instances, from Haraway’s cyborg to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s stone, scholars have folded nonliving forms and entities into these multiplex ecologies.⁶ Mel Chen has questioned the “animacy hierarchy” itself, the grouping that “conceptually arranges human life, disabled life, animal life, plant life, and forms of nonliving material in orders of value and priority.”⁷ Alongside and in conversation with these scholarly trends, there have been, in recent decades, distinctive endeavors to imagine the ontological specificity and moral standing of a constellation of beings beyond an anthropocentric horizon. Among the best known of these are experiments in investing aspects of “Nature” with philosophical and political consequence. In 2017 New Zealand extended legal personhood to the Whanganui River. This was followed by a similar ruling for the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, while in July 2019, Bangladesh recognized all its rivers as living entities in the eyes of the law in an attempt to protect them from pollution, illegal dredging, and human encroachment.⁸ These rulings came in the wake of Article 71 of the 2008 constitution of Ecuador; drawing on the indigenous cosmology of the Andean

region, the Ecuadorian constitution endowed Nature or Pachamama with “the right to be integrally respected in its existence, and to the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structures, functions, and evolutionary processes.”⁹ Bolivia followed suit in 2011. Commenting on the incorporation of the natural into the imaginary of law and governance, Marisol de la Cadena notes that many indigenous people of the Andean region inhabit animated landscapes in which sacred mountains or earth beings exist in intimate connection with human communities. But she also suggests that earth beings or Nature are more than entities entitled to rights; they constitute a more capacious category altogether. Earth beings, she suggests, have agency—though evidence of this is irreducible to empirical verification; they are world-making but “ahistorical,” and though no proof is available in historical or scientific terms of their “eventful” capacity, we would be ill-advised to deny their reality.¹⁰ It is important to note that for both the Andeans and their ethnographer, these earth beings are more than biophysical entities. They have an existence in the immaterial dimension of the sacred.

Scholarly work on South Asia is in implicit and often explicit conversation with the scholarly trends noted above. It has been attentive for some time to the comingling of human and more or other than human worlds, and to putting some pressure on the ways in which we think subjects, objects, and worlds are made. In a 2015 issue of this journal, Manan Ahmed Asif and Anand Vivek Taneja argue that “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.”¹¹ They identify animals and humans as inhabitants of commingled worlds. But that otherworldly beings (poltergeists and jinns among them) constitute important characters in the multitudinous world Asif and Taneja outline in the introduction is also evident, even if the editors desist from saying so explicitly. Taneja himself adduces evidence of a traffic across multiple domains of being, material and immaterial, in his ethnography of the petitioners of all faiths who flock to the *dargah* (Muslim saint’s shrine) of Firozshah Kotla in Delhi to seek *insaf* (justice) for their worldly woes. Through these petitioners he comes to be acquainted with a sacred pluriverse of jinns and saintly cats and snakes that offer succor to the afflicted.¹²

In another notable anthropological work set in the Kumaon, Radhika Govindrajan scrutinizes the imaginatively and ethically consequential place of animal

lives in *pahari* (rural, hill-dwelling) politics. The human inhabitants of Kumaon understand ontological differences not so much in terms of their contrast to animals or gods as in terms of the distinctions between insiders and outsiders, mountain-dwellers and plains-dwellers, whether human, animal, or divine. Govindrajan’s ethnography thus features a rich dramatis personae including sacrificial goats, ritually significant *pahari* cows, delinquent monkeys, “otherwild” pigs, and sexy bears, dogs, and leopards in addition to a full complement of mountain-dwelling humans and deities. What is especially salutary about Govindrajan’s delineation of this relatedness across multiple ontological forms is that she does not sentimentalize it as nonviolent mutuality. The love and duty that animate human and other-than-human beings sit cheek by jowl with, and indeed may be inseparable from, “decidedly uninnocent” modes of violence and hierarchy. Their relations are “both desirable and undesirable,” drawing as much “on incommensurable difference as ineffable affinity between particular individuals for its emergence.”¹³

The intersection of human, natural, and, often, sacred narrative thus functions as a formal, epistemological, and ontological challenge to the ways in which we think about the worlds we encounter and inhabit. Such convergences and conjugations also make clear that what is other than human unsettles and even surpasses our given analytic forms, including our current desire for heterogeneity and legibility as redemptive forces. What is other than human, especially when it encompasses nonliving and immaterial forms, is not necessarily assimilable within any liberal project of inclusiveness and the forms of recognition it entails. As the work of Taneja, Govindrajan, and Ray makes palpable, categories such as species, life/death, and materiality prove insufficient to encompass the other than human forces extant in the worlds they describe. Kim TallBear’s advocacy of “an understanding of the intimate knowing relatedness of all things,” one in which the material and immaterial are entangled without a concern to maintain the necessitated secular disposition in the academy, seems apposite here.¹⁴ In a comment that is germane for many of the essays in this special section, she describes an “indigenous metaphysic” as one that permits “enfolding spirits or souls into descriptions of the beingness of nonhumans.”¹⁵ However, even as the essays attend to the urgency of reckoning with “spirits or souls” in our conception of the other

than human being, it is critical to remember that such cosmological conceptions are as much a component of Western philosophies as they are of non-Western ones. Unlike TallBear, we would argue that they are not particular to indigenous metaphysics alone. The sacralization of life itself, for example, owes much to Christianity. “The reason why life has risen to the top of our priorities and has become the matter of our concerns is Christianity,” writes Gil Anidjar.¹⁶ Appreciating this also allows us to recognize that not all entanglements across human and other than human worlds, often valorized as eco-intimacies or regard for indigenous knowledges, merit celebration, which the essays in this issue make abundantly clear.

“Other than Human: Rethinking Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia” attends to the liminal, incalculable dimension of the other than human and the difficulty of conjoining it with the human. In many forms of contemporary politics, the demand for recognition, especially by marginalized communities, occupies a certain pride of place, and the lack or failure of such recognition is understood to inflict substantive harm on those from whom recognition is withheld. Famously, Charles Taylor has averred that “due recognition” is “a vital human need” in a democratic polity.¹⁷ Such recognition need not always be based on mutuality or reciprocity. As countless scholars of, say, animal studies or the environmental humanities have insisted, recognition should not be limited only to those entities capable of being subjects of recognition themselves. Yet even these non-liberal forms of recognition are not necessarily adequate to the challenge of engaging with otherness. As Jacques Derrida has observed, the forms of recognition entailed in acknowledging or serving as a witness to the nonhuman animal, for instance, can serve primarily to affirm the primacy of the human subject who sees and offers recognition.¹⁸ Mindful of this caution, we note how the other than human eludes capture in these essays, frustrating our attempts to proclaim dominion over the category itself since it, too, is imbricated in the very divisions that its recovery was supposed to solder. In this volume, it cannot be simply another object to be incorporated into an ever-expanding social scientific or humanist bestiary. As we know, producing such bestiaries often takes the form of lists of different kinds of forms, forces, and scales, such as Karen Barad’s “electrons, molecules, brittlestars, jellyfish, coral reefs, dogs, rocks, icebergs, plants, asteroids, snowflakes, and bees.”¹⁹ The other than human is not best understood in terms of what Gayatri Spivak has called, in relation

to identity claims, a “roll-call concept.”²⁰ Instead, our contributors trace the lineaments of how the other than human puts pressure on our sense of the secular contours of imperial rule and the postcolonial condition. Their essays compel a certain conjugation of questions of animality and anthropocentrism with the concerns of the scholarship on secularism in religious studies and the ontological turn in anthropology.

In “The Time of History and the Times of Gods,” Dipesh Chakrabarty describes the challenge of producing an account of Indian industrial workers whose practices are animated by a belief in “the presence and agency of gods or spirits in the very process of labor itself.”²¹ How might this be achieved within the protocols of a secular and universalist discipline like history, though without ignoring or explaining away the nonsecular phenomenology of his subjects? Such a challenge is impossible of resolution; it speaks to the incommensurability—indeed, the “radical untranslatability”—between normatively disenchanting disciplines like history (or anthropology, or literary scholarship) and the imaginations in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural are actors in the material world.²² “Writing about the presence of gods and spirits in the secular language of history or sociology [or, we would add, anthropology or literary criticism] would . . . be like an act of translating into a universal language what belongs to a field of differences,” he says.²³ The fact that such translation across the abyss that separates enchantment from disenchantment is difficult if not practically impossible is not an argument for jettisoning it. Nor can it be a simple argument for a swerve from the material to the numinous. Rather, such translation must seek to gesture, necessarily imperfectly, toward the forms of unassimilable difference—assuming in this instance the form of supernatural entities—that it can neither naturalize entirely nor occult out of existence. The essays in this special section invite us to take note of the fact that the worlds or ecologies they discuss are not entirely secular and cannot be parsed purely in naturalist terms; the other than human includes a host of powerfully consequential forces and powers, including those that we have come to denominate the sacred. As a result, the goal of this special section cannot be merely retrieval or recuperation or addition; rather, it is to underline the status of the other than human as the name of a limit to our modes of organizing forms and experiences.

The contributors engage these debates in three interrelated strands of inquiry from anthropology, history, and literary studies. We begin with questions about

how the other than human has been limited in social scientific discourse through its secular commitments, which poses challenging questions about translation across nonintersecting epistemological domains.

Asking to rethink our attachments and assumptions requires that we begin by addressing the commitments in pronouncing a place for the other than human in the social sciences and humanities in the first place. Questioning the nonhuman turn broadly in the academy, Mayanthi Fernando discusses how there remains an implicit secularity in the coupling of “nature” and “culture” even in the work on indigenous ontologies, new ecologies, and multispecies relations. In particular, Fernando questions the absence of the supernatural in the undoing of the nature/culture distinction. Offering a vigorous critique of scholarly practice in relation to the nonhuman that strives for recuperation and redemption, Fernando argues that to think more capaciously about the other than human requires that we concomitantly think less secularly. The examples of South Asian scholarship cited above attest to “the impossibility of removing gods and spirits from the social and ecological worlds humans (and animals) inhabit.” Yet, she notes, scholars and writers strain to keep the supernatural at bay, even though it is an inextricable part of the textile of the worlds they represent. The work of Amitav Ghosh offers a particularly striking manifestation of these constraints. As a novelist of climate fiction seeking to get the full measure of the Anthropocene in the Sundarbans, he turns to a multiplex world of tiger-demons, goddesses, dolphins, and snakes. But *The Great Derangement* (2016), his nonfiction work on climate catastrophe, finds no place for a nonsecular cast of forces and entities; in it, tiger-demons are reduced to mere tigers, and there are no goddesses in sight.

Like Fernando, Megnaa Mehta explores the dimension of the other than human by focusing on the Sundarbans through a different ethical and orientation not bound to an anthropocentric or a naturalistic horizon. For her, this orientation is most visible in the animistic ethos of the deltaic landscape, protected by the forest deity Bonbibi. Those who enter the abode of Bonbibi are meant to follow certain ethico-religious codes of conduct or rules (*niyams*) while in her forest. These “rules of the jungle,” or *jongoler niyam*, an intricate set of prescriptions and prohibitions, guide resource use and social relationships among people who fish and collect crabs and honey in the forest commons; the animals who inhabit the same spaces; and the local deities and demons with whom both humans and animals are in relation. These rules of “divine governance” both

emerge from and engender a particular ethos of community life within a particularly dangerous landscape. A Sundarbans “cosmo-politics” in which goddesses and tiger-demons play a leading role suggests that the source of sovereignty in the forest is not confined to contemporary state institutions or legal jurisprudence, but shared with ethico-religious and supernatural forms of older provenance. At the same time, Mehta reminds us, the abutment of such suprahuman forms upon human and animal worlds is no guarantee of egalitarianism, nonviolence, or ecological awareness, and she cautions against the valorization of animism as the answer to the crisis of the Anthropocene.

Along similar lines, Rajbir Singh Judge contends that to rethink the inflections of the secular and the harmonious translation it imposes means one also has to interrogate historicity and its obsession with context. Judge focuses on early twentieth-century Punjab and the poetry of Bhai Vir Singh to argue that situating poetry into historical context circumscribes it by tying poetry to region, thereby creating a seamless economy of exchange. Judge argues that such a grasp on Punjab and historicity, however, is loosened when we consider the other than human. The other than human in Singh’s poetry encompasses a congeries of registers and entities—the nonhuman animal, the “natural” world (sky, stars, stream, rocks, and so on), a world of objects, and organs disaggregated from the human body—that render ambiguous the angle from which the relation of human and other than human becomes legible. The other than human, put another way, challenges the overt focus on history, conquest, and vision that undergirds our understanding of the Punjabi literary scene by functioning as an impediment to mediation, translation, and recognition central to the secular. It is an impediment since the other than human is, as Fernando also notes, fractured from the human. The other than human, therefore, unsettles the salvific hope that we derive from our redemptive categories and opens a possibility for a different type of ethical encounter, one where we are left with what can only be an unsatisfied and unrecognized desire without object and, at times, directive.

In writing about secular commitments, one is already writing about masked Christian theological disputes.²⁴ As Anidjar contends, “Secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions.”²⁵ Furthermore, Anidjar continues, “Orientalism is secularism, and secularism is Christianity.” Parama Roy

and Sandhya Shetty turn to these intertwined names of Orientalism and Christianity to consider how the other than human became bound to particular unities and divisions in colonial South Asia. Roy asks about these Christian theological presuppositions in relation to the other than human, whether in animal or sacral form, in her examination of the career of the “wolf-child”—a human child lost or sacrificed by human parents but nurtured by wolf mothers—in imperial South Asia. Notably, wolf children become a particular concern of evangelical Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; for the latter, these children feature as subjects in a miracle narrative, in which they are preserved from harm against all odds by their divinely animated lupine foster mothers. In a striking inversion of animal and human norms, the predatory animal comes to be conscripted in the ranks of the Christian elect and to stand as a rebuke to the practices of wantonly careless or cruel non-Christian humans. This history limns the curious trajectory that begins with an anthropology of the cultures that sacrifice children to wolves and ends in a missionary theology that claims wolf children as evidence of Christian grace and redemption.

An embattled evangelicalism on the imperial frontier thus takes on unpredictable animal partners to conjure up a miraculous vision of trans-species solidarity and transformation, though this hospitable ecology at the edge of the forest is inseparable from an assertion of civilizational (religious-racial) supremacism. The story compels the question, What, precisely, is an ecology, and what does it encompass? For the missionaries in the story, an ecology consists of varied human and animal life-forms, certainly, but also includes numinous forms and forces that impinge upon them. It is impossible simply to remove such forces from the social and ecological worlds that humans and animals inhabit, and the wolf child’s story makes little sense unless understood as illustrating the divine sectors through which humans and animals are bound together in their world-making.

Sandhya Shetty reminds us of how such theological assumptions undergird Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (1927), producing what Shetty terms a “fable of sovereignty.” A jeremiad against an Indian/Hindu demand for self-rule, this early twentieth-century text spectacularly showcases a Hindu male cruelty to women and to animals that coexists with vociferous and hypocritical avowals of vegetarian nonviolence. As such, Mayo’s fable is indexed to a Christianized

political theology grounded in carnivorous assertion as an indispensable condition of rule, and from which the polytheistic vegetarian is definitionally cast out. At this intersection of biology and political theology, the language of eating and animality becomes central to the differential determination of the enemy in the imagination of a reconfigured empire contending with Indian anti-colonial nationalism. In the subcontinental incarnation of a history of the enemy, the Muslim comes curiously to be solicited as a vigorous monotheistic carnivore and instrument of imperial Christian vengeance against the Southern idolatrous Hindu with his flaccid body and poor vegetarian diet. It is, Shetty teaches us, a thanatopolitical impulse in Mayo’s Orientalist rendering, indexed to a Christian political theology, that upholds slaughter and carnivory against the vegetarian. This fantasy of carnivory is integral, then, to enemy-making in the subcontinent just as the wolf-children are central in marking grace. And, recall, both the enemy and grace are limits-concepts to the law within a Christian theological frame.²⁶

Finally, Naisargi Dave’s essay on the affective politics of animal activism in India reminds us that the ethical is not simply given or grasped, but a practice that is constrained by the limits of liberal recognition (and protection), most notably in the concept of love.²⁷ Examining the relationship between animals, desire, and love in India, Dave argues that the practice of indifference, which is called an ethic of nonviolence, looks a lot like the politics of differentiation, which is valorized as love. Against the politics of distinction in relation to animals, Dave foregrounds an immanent ethic of what she calls indifference to difference—or “being in difference.” For Dave, this being in difference neither desires difference nor differentiation nor belonging in sameness. Rather she points us toward a politics of *viraaha*, for example, that is to love in distance, to not possess. Pointing us toward shades of this immanent ethic in precolonial South Asian conceptions of love such as *ishq*, a prenationalist revolutionary philosophy of Gandhian *ahimsa*, and in the everyday life of animal activists, Dave makes an appeal for an impassioned ethics without love.

Together and separately, articles in this special section speak to the difficulty of any neat methodological and theoretical rendering of the other than human. Shifting from simply undoing the distinction between human and the other than human, each of the contributors grapples with how the other than human refuses to provide any easy to grasp object or politics. Our

contributors establish in a multitude of ways the epistemological possibilities and challenges that inhere in probing the secular limits of our received understanding of the other than human—a received understanding that typically undergirds the work even of those whose scholarly archive encompasses the nonsecular. Such an expansive, nonsecular sense of the other than human is a slippery one and is incommensurable rather than compatible with protocols of legibility and recognition and the calculations these involve. As Dave’s essay underscores, the humanist languages of love and protection we have brought to our relations with non-human animals are in the last instance incompatible with the more radical, open-ended forms of hospitality demanded of us. Though not engaging with the nonsecular dimensions of the other than human, her essay speaks to the conceptual-epistemological and ethical entailments that are involved in the imaginative dilation of what the other than human encompasses. In her essay, as in the others, the other than human appears as a series of yet unsettled questions about life and death, animate and inanimate, and materiality and immateriality. By asking such questions in the social, political, intellectual, and religious landscape of colonial and postcolonial South Asia, this collection hopes to provoke a deeper understanding of the partitions and provocations that organize the other than human. Only thus might we envisage movements toward undoing, reshaping, as well as plumbing the ethical and political injunctions that emerge from it.

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Parama Roy is professor of English at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (University of California Press, 1998) and *Alienatory Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (Duke University Press, 2010), and coeditor of *States of Trauma: Gender and Violence in South Asia* (Zubaan, 2009). Her current book project, titled “Species, Sacrifice, and the Question of Empire” and from which this article is drawn, examines the economies (and aneconomies) of sacrifice across human and other

than human worlds in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain and its empire.

Notes

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1. Agamben, *The Open*. Agamben’s own emphasis in this text is on “the decisive political conflict . . . between the animality and the humanity of man” (80). For distinctions produced by the machine, see Grusin, “Introduction,” xi.
2. Haraway, *When Species Meet*. In an introduction to a special section of this journal titled “Nonhuman Empires,” Rohan Deb Roy asks that we “question the perceived autonomy of the domains of matter, the human, and social political processes, and to explore their interanimation” (70).
3. Moore, “Ecology, Capital, and the Nature of Our Times.”
4. Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*.
5. Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*, 173.
6. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Stone* has sought to break down the geological or mineral frontier—to push beyond the point where species meet, in other words—to advocate for the strange animacy of the lithic.
7. Chen, *Animacies*, 13. Also see Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 40.
8. Westerman, “Should Rivers Have Same Legal Rights as Humans?”
9. Cited in de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes,” 335.
10. de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*.
11. Asif and Taneja, “Introduction: Animals, Ethics, and Enchantment in South Asia and the Middle East,” 201.
12. Taneja, *Jinnealogy*.
13. Govindrajana, *Animal Intimacies*, 4.
14. TallBear, “Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary,” 191.
15. TallBear, “Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary,” 191.
16. Anidjar, “The Meaning of Life,” 714. And, through it all, “capitalism is an enormous smelter,” as Elizabeth Povinelli puts it, “shoveling into its furnace the living and dead” (Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 167; emphasis ours).
17. Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 26.
18. Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. As against such anthropocentric witnessing, Naisargi Dave invites us to take seriously the “becoming animal” of some animal rights activists (“Witness,” 444–48).
19. Barad, “On Touching,” 207.
20. Spivak, “Subaltern Talk,” 294.
21. Chakrabarty, “The Time of History and the Times of Gods,” 40.

22. Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of Gods," 39. In Chakrabarty's telling, those who share their world with gods and spirits are definitionally subaltern and non-Western. The essays in this issue suggest otherwise.
23. Chakrabarty, "The Time of History and the Times of Gods," 39.
24. The literature on this subject is vast. For example, see Löwith, *Meaning in History*; Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*; Anidjar, *Blood*; and Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*.
25. Anidjar, "Secularism," 62. Also see Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 29.
26. For enemy as limit concept to the law, see Anidjar, "Terror Right," 38. For grace as limit concept to the law, see Agamben, *State of Exception*, 85.
27. Povinelli, *Empire of Love*. On liberal protection, see Povinelli, "Bleak House: An Afterword," 132–33.

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