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Guest Editorial

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THE ANIMAL QUESTION IN SOUTH ASIA: A POST-MODERN *PAÑCATANTRA*

> Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature.
>
> (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.2)

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South Asian scriptures bear witness to multiple and contrasting approaches to animals and animal life. Textual injunctions range from abstinence from violence (*ahiṃsā*) and absolute respect for all living beings (e.g. 'All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence', *Tattvārthasūtra* 5.21) to the liberalization of animal (human and non-human) sacrifice (*Kālikā Purāṇa* 55.3-6). The debate on the 'animal' and its place in the micro- and macro-cosmos has led to countless speculations. Early scriptures in South Asia confirm an enduring dilemma. Are animals 'verily food' (*Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 3.9.8)? Were animals created for the sake of sacrifice (*Manu* 5.39)? Should animals be eaten only as medicine (*Suśruta-saṃhitā, sūtrasthāna* 46.53-135)? Or should they be respected as embodied beings in the beginningless *saṃsāra*¸ like humans? As we learn from Jha's study on *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (2002), several factors (political, social, economic and environmental) have contributed to counter the authority of early Sanskrit sources. The affirmation and consolidation of Buddhism and Jainism as well as that of Hindu devotional movements contributed significantly to challenge previous ideas on the animal body. Further to that, new *ethoi* found their place in the Subcontinent. Islam, Sikhism and Christianity along with other Indic religions all made their contributions to the relation between human and non-human living beings.

Our interest in animals—and therefore the idea behind this work—moves from different premises. Rather than focusing on the scriptural, normative, traditions, this special issue of *Religion of South Asia* intends to discuss folk narratives and the way they have been expressed and transmitted through literature, arts, myth and ritual in South Asia. In folklore—'a reflex of the lifestyle of a people' (Gramsci 2007: 89)—animals provide the most efficacious and long-lasting imagery for the definition and perpetuation of a culturally (localized) informed pedagogy. Animals do what we can't (or should not) do. As such, we found de Martino's analysis of folklore as a way to comment on existential struggle for emancipation extremely useful. And this struggle, in a way or the other, is invariably linked to manage the ecosystem, an arena where creatures interact and inform each other's existence. This is what de Martino called 'progressive folklore' (1951).

From the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius to the annoying—yet wise—Talking Cricket of *Pinocchio*, from the Minotaur of Greek mythology to the wolf of *Little Red Riding Hood*, from the *Planet of the Apes* to Orwell's *Animal Farm*, from the myth of the vampire to the snake of the Bible, folktales in Western culture are rich in parables where animals are the main characters. Sometimes there are hybrid beings, half-animal, half-human. Sometimes there is an emphasis on the human versus the animal. Sometimes there are animals that behave like humans, or humans that act as animals (Doniger 2012: 350). In Western narratives, however, what we often have are not just animals, but humans embodied in an animal (cf. Patton 2006: 34). The 'animality' of the cricket (or the ass, bull, wolf, ape, etc.) manifests itself only when human nature needs a boost, or lacks the skills of the species it is embodied into. With this in mind, we take

from Sahlins who noted that 'Western metaphysics...supposes an opposition between nature and culture that is distinctive of our own folklore—and contrastive to the many peoples who consider that beasts are basically human rather than humans basically beasts. These peoples could know no primordial "animal nature", let alone one that must be overcome' (2008: 2; cf. Ingold 2012: 34).

Rather than an encounter, in the Western mind, the human/animal dichotomy seems to be a clash. Agamben recently observed that the human being historically exists only insofar it 'transcends and transforms' the animals that support it (2010: 19). By negating its animal nature, the human is finally able to control and eventually destroy 'animality'. Agamben concludes suggesting that 'man is a fatal disease of the animal' (2010: 19).

Mastering 'the animal' is therefore an ontological necessity in Western (and Westernized) societies. In other words—as suggested by Derrida (2008: 102)—the animal is not just reified, but made into a taboo, an object that is 'at once religiously excluded, kept in silence, reduced to silence, consecrated, and sacrificed, branded a forbidden or just plain branded'. Hence the creation of allegories—and symbols—where the human and the animal meet. Such symbols act as pedagogical tools at the convergence of nature (*physis*) and culture (*nómos*), but at the same time they constantly remind us of the fragility of the human presence. As de Martino informs us: 'since the relationship which constitutes presence is the same relationship that renders culture possible, the threat of not being-here in human history is configured as the risk of losing culture and of receding without compensation into nature' (de Martino in Saunders 1995: 333).

The tension of the Western person is determined by the greatest anxiety of all, that of losing everything and being *regressed* to nature, a dystopia featured by the impossibility of reason. Such is believed to be the territory of the animal—or the animalistic (sub)human that must be dominated—as opposed to the organized culture of which (some) human beings claim to be protagonists (cf. Calarco 2008: 129–30).

It has been observed that the difference between animal and human in Western culture depends on politics and ethics (Waldau 2006: 46), two concepts that are unmistakably anthropocentric (cf. Wiese 2012). Sahlins responds to that by inverting the established paradigm—the *status quo*—and offers an interesting interpretation of what *nómos* actually is. In particular he calls 'realists' those peoples 'who take culture as the original state of human existence and the biological species as secondary and conditional' (2008: 104). This has been captured—though in different ways—by many and diverse contemporary narratives with the intention to criticize modern assumptions or contemporary hegemonic praxis. A good example can be found in one of the many filmic renderings of the 1912 novel *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs. In *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984, directed by Hugh Hudson), John, the Earl of Greystoke—formerly a feral boy—can

be interpreted as a 'realist' when he mourns Kerchak, the chimpanzee that adopted him back in Africa. Unsurprisingly, it is not the expression of grief that strikes the human crowd surrounding him—including the killers of the chimpanzee. What causes outrage is John's desperate cry: 'He was my father!' In so doing, the Earl of Greystoke is publicly advertising a culture that transcends species and therefore offends Victorian values. In that, we agree with Steiner when he suggests that the 'animal question' should be readdressed moving from the Aristotelian notion of *physis* (2006: 126–27).

The only difference is that, perhaps, not all human beings need to reconsider their place in the world in order to distance themselves by the dramatic conclusion that 'human nature endangers our [human] existence' (Sahlins 2008: 112). Besides the colonizing tendency of Western politics and the postcolonial response to it (Krishna 2010: 251), other interpretations exist (rather, they co-exist). While most political and theological discourses reject human-animal symbiosis, folklore is about multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari 2009: 264, 278; see also Sahlins 1976: 97–98). Indic culture is a good example. In South Asia the individualization of the human being and the otherization of the 'animal other' are less definite. The construction of the body is more flexible. Bodies are porous entities in which the essence of beings moves temporarily into. Transmigration, possession, embodiment, reincarnation, descent are not mystical concepts related to an infantile projection or a secret, supreme, condition of the mind. What in South Asia is ordinary reality, in Western culture has been relegated to fairy tales, is derogatively labelled 'folklore' and explained as allegory. But as Geertz pointed out: '[t]here are some dragons—"tigers in red weather"—that deserve to be looked into' (2000: 63).

So, instead of discussing what animals teach us, we believe that the right question to ask is: What do we *want* animals to tell us? The study of folklore offers a valuable perspective to address such critical matter. In his study on South Asian folklore, Korom (2006: 56–57) has observed that 'wisdom and rationality are valuable commodities not easily acquired' while Stewart noticed that the world that folk narratives address is 'a pragmatic one, where the need to maintain a proper order requires unusual remedies for equally unusual situations' (2004: 7).

The complex mythology that developed in South Asia is an ongoing project aiming at integrating embodied beings and their actions in a wider reality. The presence of animals in folk narratives (but also myths) is not unintentional. We use animals to secure consensus. Animals are *like* humans but do not act as humans. What is problematic is the way their behaviour (i.e. actions) is interpreted, rendered into words and then passed onto history. Two trends can be thus identified. On the one hand, even though 'perfect animals...do not exist in the real world' (White 1991: 16), global consumerism has created the equation that animal is anomaly and therefore its nature must be rectified. On the other, animal actions continue to be part of the law of *karma*, a concept that Olivelle calls a 'theodicy, a legitimization of good and evil' (2009: xxxvii).

In response to that, this special issue seeks to identify those areas where South Asian narratives still perpetuate the original spirit of animal folklore and to appraise what has been lost and what has been domesticated. Like the original *Pañcatantra* (attributed to the Brahmin Viṣṇuśarman, c. 300 CE), the most popular collection of folk tales on animals in South Asia, this collection of articles is not interested in discussing sectarian understandings and representations of animals and animal life. Rather it aims to explore how animality—here intended as other-than-human forms of embodied life—contributed to shaping human paradigms in South Asia and offered alternative worldviews. Non-human animals are discussed as both subjects and objects, as divine messengers and victims of sacrifice, as examples to follow but also as nefarious omens, as wise counsellors as well as portents, as symbols of wealth, pride and courage but also as signifiers of disease and decay.

The structure of this special issue reflects that of the *Pañcatantra*. As in the original text, this is divided into five books (Tantras) whose single stories (our chapters) act as sub-strings inscribed in larger narrative frames. The principal themes of each book are signalled by keywords which provide the link between successive narrative cycles. Such a structural arrangement creates the backbone for the main discussion, that is, a critical exploration of animality as perpetuated in South Asian narratives. Moreover, the key words chosen for each chapter are meant to describe the underlying state of mind or emotional flavour which, we feel, is conveyed by every contributor. As the ancient Indian concepts of *rasa* (feeling, essence) and *dhvani* (sound, tone), respectively developed in Sanskrit aesthetical theory by the sage Bharata (c. second century BCE—second century CE) and by the Kashmiri scholar Ānandavardhana (ninth century CE), each chapter is thought of as evoking an aesthetic experience which leaves an emotional impact on the reader. The peculiar nature of this impact is determined both by the animal(s) protagonist(s) of each chapter and by the specific way the authors present them through their circumstantial role and functions. The choice of these themes thus revolves around what we have identified as existential modes and attitudes, central to the human quest of life.

The first Tantra (Wonder, Monstrosity and Conflict) explores the portentous nature of animals. The three stories here contained exalt the marvel that animals are and their pedagogical role in humans' life (Olivelle), examine their hidden—perhaps most disturbing—qualities (Smith), and reflect on how they served as a paradigm for another—even more disturbing—domestication enterprise (Torri).

The second Tantra (Conflict, Ethics and Environment) includes tales of human struggle in protecting animal life through balancing ancestral culture with the inevitable clash of tradition and 'modernity', or simply different worldviews. Animals serve here for the purpose of illustrating conflicting ideologies on gendered discourses (Collett), of discussing miracles at the con-

vergence of warrior and saint ethics (Nesbitt) and of claiming territorial kinship with the spirits of the land (Beggiora).

In the third Tantra (Environment, Myth, Devotion) we learn about the presence of animals in foundation myths and in the definition of the environment as social and ancestral territory, an arena that transcends time and space. Non-human animals are holistic healers and controllers of order and disorder (Vargas-O'Bryan), they are the repositories of a secret knowledge which is offered to humans through the gift of their bodies (Chaudhury) and sources of awareness and compassion for all living beings trapped in *saṃsāra* (De Clercq).

The fourth Tantra (Devotion, Wisdom, Awe) mainly focuses on love. Human beings learn from animal behaviour, and stories where animals are protagonists contribute to enrich discourses of piety and loyalty (Pinault), wisdom and passion (Dähnhardt) and moral rectitude and dedication (Dwyer).

In the fifth and last Tantra (Awe, Fear, Death) animality is embodied in ominous presences. Human amazement towards 'the animal' is still there, but other feelings emerge. The animal becomes a tool to offend and harm the enemy (Zeiler), to control anxieties and overcome fears (Allocco) and to tame the tragedy that is disease and its natural consequence, death (Ferrari).

As a natural prosecution of the last theme, we wish here to highlight two important aspects that link the human and the animal dimensions, namely power and fear. Especially in folklore, these aspects—deeply embedded in the environment and embodied in different living receptacles—are central to the definition of culture. Ponniah has explored these themes in his analysis of Tamil folklore (2011: 19–35). His work addresses issues of social mobility at the intersection of function (the effectiveness of ritual power) and performance (the power of ritual actor). Although animals are not mentioned, this model is particularly useful for this study. The animals discussed here are functional to ritual and its outcomes but at the same time they also are the embodiment of power. Within that, animals are located between *doxa* (norms and values unquestionably rooted in society) and *habitus* (cultural disposition) (Bronner 2012: 34, cf. Goody 2010: 93–94). This appears even more clearly when we consider the way we look at animals and the way we represent them in that fluid narrative of human needs, joys, reminiscence, fears, anxieties and expectations that is folklore.

The themes discussed in this special issue of *Religions of South Asia*—wonder, conflict, ethics, environment, devotion, wisdom, awe and death—are looked at through the eyes of different species. We thus concur with Clough when he says that: 'Attending carefully to the differences between animals is both a joy and a responsibility' (2012: 76). Although we may debate about who or what originated such multiplicity of beings (nature, chaos, one or more deities, etc.), what eventually this work has sought to bring is not a convergence of visions but an appreciation of the way incredulity manifests and compels us to tell stories.

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