

Questions of the Nonhuman:

Rethinking Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia

Columbia University
November 14-15, 2019



Thursday, November 14th

80 Claremont Ave

Room 101

- 1:30 – 2:00 PM** **Rajbir Singh Judge, Columbia University**
Introductory Remarks
- 2:00 – 3:00 PM** **Nandini Thiyagarajan, New York University**
*On Cobras and Climate Change: South Asian
Mythology, Precarious Environments, and Multispecies
Inhabitants*
Respondent: Naisargi Dave
- 3:00 – 3:10 PM** Break
- 3:10 – 4:10 PM** **Sandhya Shetty, University of New Hampshire**
*Cruel Husbandry: Vegetarians and other Carnivores in
Katherine Mayo's Mother India*
Respondent: Parama Roy
- 4:10 – 4:20 PM** Break
- 4:20 – 5:20 PM** **Megnaa Mehta, London School of Economics**
*Nonhuman Governance: Reconceiving Political
Potency through a Muslim Forest Deity in the
Sundarbans of India*
Respondent: Mayanthi Fernando

Friday, November 15th

Knox Hall, 606 W 122nd Street
Room 207

- 9:20 – 10:20 AM** **Rohan Deb Roy, University of Reading**
White Ants, Empire, and Entomo-politics in South Asia
Respondent: Rajbir Singh Judge
- 10:20 – 10:30 AM** Break
- 10:30 – 11:30 AM** **Naisargi N. Dave, University of Toronto**
Appetite: Does That Which is Inevitable Cease to Matter?
Respondent: Sandhya Shetty
- 11:30 – 11:40 AM** Break
- 11:40 – 12:40 PM** **Parama Roy, UC Davis**
Wolf Parables/Notes Towards a Wolfish Sublime
Respondent: Nandini Thiyagarajan
- 12:40 – 1:40 PM** **Lunch**
- 1:40 – 2:40 PM** **Mayanthi Fernando, UC Santa Cruz**
Supernatureculture? Beyond the Secularity of the “Nonhuman”
Respondent: Rohan Deb Roy
- 2:40 – 2:50 PM** Break
- 2:50 – 3:50 PM** **Rajbir Singh Judge, Columbia University**
Waiting to See/Be Seen: Toward a Poetics Beyond the Human
Respondent: Megnaa Mehtta
- 3:50 – 4:00 PM** Break
- 4:00 – 5:00 PM** **Roundtable**

Abstracts and Participants

Nandini Thiyagarajan, New York University

On Cobras and Climate Change: South Asian Mythology, Precarious Environments, and Multispecies Inhabitants

My paper takes up the complex roles that cobras play in the South Asian imaginary through a focus on Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* which moves between the Sundarbans, Brooklyn, and Kolkata. Ghosh tells the story of climate change, migration, and a growing sense of vulnerability in the Anthropocene by centering the novel on Manasa Devi, the Goddess of snakes and poison who is predominantly worshipped in Bengal. The forces that are making the earth unlivable and precarious for so many do not act on humans alone; animals also endure the Anthropocene. What Ghosh's novel captures, I argue, are the ways in which mythology ebbs and flows throughout our lives and histories and I'm specifically interested in why myths about nonhuman animals, like cobras who are so full of mythology, symbolism, and history, would surface now.

I look to Asif and Taneja's work on enchantment to unpack the work that *Gun Island* does for and around cobras, first by foregrounding the crucial question of "what does it mean to live with others?" (Asif & Taneja 201). How can we learn to live in and share this world that has been shaped by colonization and imperialism—and to be sure the current disproportionate impacts of climate change are a product of empire—with both nonhuman animals and humans who are very different from us (Asif and Taneja 201)? How do precolonial stories and mythology move through history (as well as across borders into the South Asian diaspora) and take shape in our current historical moment? My paper contends that Ghosh looks to South Asian mythology precisely at this moment because these stories invite us to work against the forces of human exceptionalism that are shaping our world and give us a way to understand ourselves as deeply connected to and even humbled by nonhuman animals. Ultimately, I am interested in how stories and storytelling shape our understandings of the natural world and animals as they embrace the absolute otherness of the land and nonhuman animals.

— Nandini Thiyagarajan is a Faculty Fellow of Environmental and Animal Studies at New York University. She works at the intersections between postcolonial studies, critical race studies, environmental humanities, and animal studies. Her current book project draws connections between migration, animals, race, and climate change.

Sandhya Shetty, University of New Hampshire

Cruel Husbandry: Vegetarians and other Carnivores in Katherine Mayo's Mother India

My paper focuses on anti-liberal iterations of the nonhuman question in late imperial India and the specific modes in which conservative counter-nationalist discourses tethered the animal question to the woman question and both, in turn, to a decision on the enemy, as beast. The animal materials and mechanics of such enemy-making are most clearly visible in Katherine Mayo's controversial *Mother India* (1927), an interwar re-articulation of Anglo-American imperial responsibility. Mayo understood well the ideological potential of the nonhuman animal and human women (separately and in conjunction) for a determination of a political enemy worth his name; she milked both in her anti-nationalist tirade. Indeed, *Mother India's* regurgitation of late-nineteenth century debates over protection of animals and child-wives evokes an incontinent subcontinent where women, animals (and others) suffer the heartless depredations of the venereal, wolfish Hindu.

Following an initial foray into Kalighat, where readers witness parallel scenes of animal sacrifice and human female abjection, we are led from cruelty to cruelty in sections devoted to women's hospitals, veterinary hospitals, milch cows, diseased pariah dogs, untouchables and Muslims. Mayo's particularly graphic exposure of cruelties meted to both mother and mother cow "by her worshippers" illuminates docile and violent animality. I argue as well that a certain beastly figuration lurks behind her representation of vegetarian piety. My reading of the cruel, insanitary nationalist-vegetarian as "world menace" foregrounds the contradictions the text proliferates around this figure: wolfish in his dissembling predation, yet chaste in dietary habits that eschew (only literal) carnivory; non-virile yet given to multiple forms of cruelty, devouring hypocrisy, and abusive violence. Following the track of starved, abused, and maimed life in *Mother India's* "workaday" report on callous husbands and husbandry, I argue that its evocation of a subcontinental political bestiary announces enmity, war, even extermination of "Southern Hindus" by biophysically virile, Abrahamic meat-eaters.

— Sandhya Shetty is Associate Professor of English at the University of New Hampshire. Her teaching interests include postcolonial fiction from South Asia and Africa, literature and medicine, and the British nineteenth-century novel. She is the author of essays on a range of subjects, including Gandhian illness and nursing, colonial obstetrics, postcolonial theory, and biopolitics, medicine and war in the postcolonial novel. Her articles have appeared in collected editions and journals such as *Contemporary Literature*, *Genders, differences*, *Diacritics*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and others. She is completing a book manuscript that explores new ways of reading medicine and colonialism in South Asia.

Megnaa Mehhta, London School of Economics

Nonhuman Governance: Reconceiving Political Potency through a Muslim Forest Deity in the Sundarbans of India

This paper is interested in exploring the political potency of a 12th century Muslim forest deity, Bonbibi, revered by those who fish, collect crabs and gather honey in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans in West Bengal. Bonbibi preaches specific conduct centred around an ethic of restraint where one should take no more than one needs. Going into the jungle is thought of as an act of begging [*bhikha*] and the forest itself is referred to as the “common storehouse” of Bonbibi. These beliefs structure social relations, they establish values of sufficiency and excess, and allow those who eke a livelihood from the forests to organize their labour in a way that protects the environmental commons. By exploring the different political and social imaginations that forests and forest deities allow for, I explore the means through which the non-human has the potential to catalyse political organization latent in peoples’ everyday moralities. My argument does not presuppose that Sundarbans residents have a distinct ‘life-world’, or a separate ontological relationship to their surroundings, but fits within the complex tapestry of historical, ecological and religious genealogies of colonial and post-colonial South Asia and specifically that of the Bay of Bengal delta.

— Megnaa Mehhta is a PhD candidate in the Department of Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is an environmental anthropologist working at the intersection of political ecology and everyday ethics. Her research draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Sundarbans mangrove forests that range across the borders of India and Bangladesh. Her work explores what conserving life means to the people living alongside a global conservation hotspot, and argues for the political potential of vernacular thought and quotidian practices of care for the commons.

Rohan Deb Roy, University of Reading

White Ants, Empire, and Entomo-politics in South Asia

By focusing on the history of white ants in colonial South Asia, this article shows how insects were ubiquitous and fundamental to the shaping of British colonial power. British rule in India was vulnerable to white ants because these insects consumed paper and wood, the key material foundations of the colonial state. The white ant problem also made the colonial state more resilient and intrusive. The sphere of strict governmental intervention was extended to include both animate and inanimate non-humans, while these insects were invoked as symbols to characterize colonized landscapes, peoples, and cultures. Nonetheless, encounters with white ants were not entirely within the control of the colonial state. Despite effective state intervention, white ants did not vanish altogether,

and remained objects of everyday control until the final decade of colonial rule and after. Meanwhile, colonized and post-colonial South Asians used white ants to articulate their own distinct political agendas. Over time, white ants featured variously as metaphors for Islamic decadence, British colonial exploitation, communism, democratic socialism, and, more recently, the Indian National Congress. This article argues that co-constitutive encounters between the worlds of insects and politics have been an intrinsic feature of British colonialism and its legacies in South Asia.

— Rohan Deb Roy is a Lecturer in South Asian History at the University of Reading (2015-present). He is particularly interested in the histories of science and medicine, histories of empire and colonialism, environmental history, and animal history. He is the author of *Malarial Subjects: Empire, Medicine and Nonhumans in British India, 1820-1909* (2017) and co-editor (with Guy Attewell) of *Locating the Medical: Explorations in South Asian History* (2018). He received his PhD from University College London (2009), and has held postdoctoral fellowships at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta, the University of Cambridge, and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin.

Naisargi N. Dave, University of Toronto

Appetite: Does That Which is Inevitable Cease to Matter?

This paper attempts to address a question—does that which is inevitable cease to matter?—by way of an ethnography of producers, marketers, and consumers of industrial meat in northern India, as well as those who seek to slow or abolish the industrial production of meat. The essay turns on an examination of two phrases. One is *hoga hi hoga*, or “it will be, no matter what.” This phrase is used to express the inevitability of the growth of the market for industrial meat. The other is *chahiye hi chahiye*, or “it has to be had.” This phrase was common among marketers promoting “ideal foods” like chicken that Indian consumers across faith would not be able to live without, and would not have to reflect upon desiring. I consider the question of mattering, both in terms of “making matter,” such as the establishing of tastes as must-have things, as well as what it means to decide that things matter.

— Naisargi N. Dave is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her research concerns emergent forms of politics and relationality in India, specifically queer and animal. Dave’s articles have appeared in journals such as *American Ethnologist*; *Cultural Anthropology*; *Social Text*; *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*; *Signs*; and *Feminist Studies*. Her book, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Duke) was awarded the Ruth Benedict Prize. She is currently working on her second book, *The [?] Sensorium: Action, Immanence, and Animality in India*.

Parama Roy, University of California, Davis
Wolf Parables/Notes Towards a Wolfish Sublime

The “wild” or “feral” child was a key figure for Enlightenment thinkers grappling with ideas about “nature,” “wildness,” “savagery,” and “nurture” in an endeavour to limn the contours of human ipseity. Two events in the eighteenth century marked the definitive emergence of this figure: the capture in 1724 of a mute teenage boy, Peter of Hanover, found walking on all fours in the forests of Lower Saxony and the publication, in 1758, of the authoritative tenth edition of Linnaeus’s *Systemae Naturae*, in which he introduced the new class *Homo ferus* as one among several varieties of *Homo sapiens*. Never entirely separable from the legends of animal-raised heroes of classical mythology, the category of the wild or feral child encompasses fact and fabulation from the very moment of its emergence.

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the wild or feral child changed continents. 1852 witnessed the birth of an unusual life form in the kingdom of Oude/Awadh: the Indian wolf child. Its begetter was General William Henry Sleeman, Resident at the Kingdom of Oude from 1849 to 1856, and, not coincidentally, the celebrated discoverer and populariser of *thuggee* as a particularly ruthless and irrational category of pan-Indian criminality. Sleeman’s work was the first endeavour to bring into legible being a class of Indian “wolf boys”—human children nurtured rather than being devoured by wolves, which was the more common experience in Oude. Unlike the European cases, though, Sleeman’s six or seven cases showcased a host of peculiarities and deficits in the economy of caste and tribe that made wolf abductions almost inevitable: a caste Hindu terror of shedding wolfish blood, their love of ostentatious display, and a callous willingness on the part of tribal communities to profit from the death of children. By sheer dint of repetition over the course of the following decades, including new discoveries that echo Sleeman’s originals, wolf boys (and, later, wolf girls) come to be established as a distinctly Indian phenomenon, meriting an entry alongside brahman, fakir, infanticide, suttee, and tiger in the folklorist William Crooke’s *Things Indian* (1906), an anthropological compendium modeled upon *Hobson-Jobson*.

From the beginning, faith as well as scepticism greeted this phenomenon, with continuous attempts to authenticate or disprove the many stories of wolf children that kept appearing. Notwithstanding the insistence by colonial officials and their readers that the feral children phenomenon was sustained by native credulity alone, we find fairly widespread acceptance of their existence among Anglo-Indians. In particular, those westerners with “Indian experience”—including colonial officials, Indian Army officers, missionaries, and those who had been raised in Anglo-India—often accepted or insisted on their existence and claimed to have seen one or more of them.

This paper will examine a range of genres of writing on wolf children from the

mid-nineteenth century to the early 1940s: journalistic reports, newspaper correspondence, travel writing, missionary reports and diaries, anthropological reports, literature, and writings on medicine and child psychology. It will pay particular attention to the dialectic between the modes of anthropological/scientific realism and the modes of allegory, satiric fantasy, tall tale, and fable that animate these discussions.

— Parama Roy is professor of English at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Indian Traffic: Identities in Questions in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (1998) and *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (2010) and coeditor of *States of Trauma* (2009). She is working on a monograph tentatively titled “Empire’s Nonhumans.”

Mayanthi Fernando, University of California, Santa Cruz
Supernatureculture? Beyond the Secularity of the “Nonhuman”

If secularity ushered in the notion of the human being as a buffered, bounded subject immune to nonhuman agents, recent attempts to posit humans as always already in relation to nonhumans, and to recognize the agency of nonhumans, may be understood as a post-secular project as much as a post-humanist one. At the same time, in much of this work, the nonhuman has largely been restricted to entities that previously fell under the sign of the “natural,” and scholars have been much more open to accepting mosquitos, mollusks, and microbes as actually existing beings and agential actors that they have “supernatural” ones like ghosts, demons, spirits, and God. This paper explores why. It asks: what secular epistemologies underlie modern attitudes toward evidence, epistemologies anchored in distinctions between animate and inanimate, visible and invisible, material and immaterial, natural and supernatural, and, ultimately, real and not-real? Why have some figures – and especially the indigenous animist – become the site for academic theorizing toward a theory of the universal human and toward hope in the wake of the Anthropocene? Why have other figures and other traditions that also take the human as radically unbounded – for instance, Islamic traditions of jinn and jinn possession – been less good to think with for many post-humanist scholars? And how might this new investment in indigenous animism map onto distinctions between religion and not-religion integral to the World Religions paradigm?

— Mayanthi Fernando is Associate Professor of Anthropology at UC Santa Cruz. Her research interests include Islam and secularism; liberalism and law; gender, sexuality, and the body; and nonhumans and the Anthropocene. Her first book, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (2014, Duke University Press), examines the intersection of religion and politics in France. She is currently working on a second book on the secularity of post-humanism and the possibilities for thinking the nonhuman more capaciously and less secularly.

Rajbir Singh Judge, Columbia University

Waiting to See/Be Seen: Toward a Poetics Beyond the Human

In 1924, E.P. Dutton and Company, the distributor of the Everyman's Library series in the United States, published a poetry collection of noted Sikh scholar and writer Bhai Vir Singh. Entitled *Nargas: Songs of a Sikh*, the volume was translated into English by the Punjabi poet, scientist and mystic, Puran Singh. A color print by the famed modernist painter Abdur Rahman Chughtai accompanied the volume. The interconnections in the Punjabi artistic and intellectual scene in the early 20th Century revealed by *Nargas* demonstrate what is now a truism in the examinations of Punjab: life refused codification into neatly demarcated 'communal' identities. But rather than read these human-to-human relations through a Punjabi context, I foreground the nonhuman registers of *Nargas*. In so doing, *Nargas* destabilizes neat and complete transactions/translations by introducing the limits to the circumscribed human and its context—an aperture in the translation as the human itself is torn apart. This signals the possibility of a poetics beyond the human, outside of human context itself.

I think of the nonhuman and the ethical by first exploring the analysis of Bhai Vir Singh's and Puran Singh's poetry in the 1920s. I argue the human/nonhuman distinction became central to translating the poetics of Bhai Vir Singh and Puran Singh into an aesthetics of historicism. Then, I examine the poetry of *Nargas* alongside the question of translation. I consider an alternative poetics by foregrounding the non-human in both Puran Singh's and Bhai Vir Singh's work and how it signaled a limit to translatability and historicity, disrupting the ends central to historicization. Finally, I end by thinking of encounter between Bhai Vir Singh and Chughtai by disarticulating the human: a focus on the question of vision and the eye, of seeing and being seen, of existences that perhaps refuse to be conceptualized.

— Rajbir Singh Judge is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at IRCPL with affiliations in the Department of Religion and South Asia Institute at Columbia University. His current project examines the ways in which Sikhism at the end of the 19th century remained a generative site through which Sikhs and their diverse milieu in the Punjab contested not only British rule, but the very nature of sovereignty. More broadly, he specializes in the cultural and intellectual history of South Asia, with a particular emphasis on the Punjab. His most recent publications can be found in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* and *History & Theory*. He has articles forthcoming in *qui parle* and *positions: asia critique*.



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