Preface

Animal Studies, in their broadest sense, are a research field of primary importance in contemporary scholarship, since animal issues are nowadays increasingly called into question in all academic disciplines. The fundamental aims of these studies are both to rethink the boundaries between human and non-human species as well as to meet increasingly pressing ethical, ecological, and economical concerns.

In the context of South Asia, the relations between humans and animals have historically been addressed in many diverse and unique ways. Indeed, around these relations revolve some fundamental ideas that are a characteristic feature of the entire South Asian civilization and distinguish it from other cultures. Even today, special attitudes toward animals characterize the lives of millions of Indians. The peculiar and highly articulated sensitivity to animals in South Asian culture constitutes a challenge to European thought, not least by urging it to understand ethical systems as historical products rather than the expression of an assumed human 'essence.'

Some major points of the South Asian approach to the relation between human and non-human animals can be summarized as follows. To start with, a fundamental concept is represented by the round of rebirths, i.e. *saṃsāra*, which is articulated in a variety of distinct ways within Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina contexts: the alternation between human and animal incarnations is considered possible depending on the accumulated merits or demerits that make up an individual's *karman*. The concept of *saṃsāra* also provides a religious hierarchy which places man at the top of the evolutionary scale. Animals themselves are the object of detailed classifications that attribute to them different degrees of sensitivity and consciousness. Moreover, the ascription of consciousness and sentience to animals is expressed in a number of different ways in South Asian texts and practices.

Another widespread and essential concept is *ahiṃsā*, i.e. nonviolence, together with the elaboration of food codes concerning the prohibition of eating the meat of certain animals and, conversely, the various types of vegetarianism and their motivations. The genesis of *ahiṃsā* and vegetarianism remains largely unclear, not least because of the chronological uncertainty of textual traditions. These ideologies, which make their first appearance around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, are preceded by the violence of the bloody Vedic sacrifices, which will continue to be practiced for a long time. To be sure, nonviolence and vegetarianism appear to be interdependent though they probably did not arise simultaneously. In their formative phase, the three great religions of South Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism—interpret them in their own peculiar way. For

instance, ancient Buddhism in the Pāli Canon preaches a strict respect for living beings but does not forbid the monk to accept meat and fish in his quest for alms, provided that the food has not been prepared—i.e. 'killed'—especially for him. Jainism is the religion that most rigorously emphasizes *ahiṃsā* and the avoidance of the ingestion of even the smallest living creature.

The theriomorphic and therianthropic conceptions of divinities—patent in Viṣṇu's *avatāra*s—is a fundamental feature of Hinduism, whose genesis and meaning remain largely enigmatic. Some animals, such as the cobra, are deities themselves, and an animal is often the *vāhana* or 'vehicle' of Hindu deities. The relation between gods and animals is conceived in both contrastive and harmonious ways. Moreover, from the time of the ancient Buddhist literature up to the present, animals are the protagonists of many narratives, where they often play a broad symbolical or ideological mediating role, and are extensively portrayed in figurative arts, not only as a form of divine therianthropism but also in order to emphasize ethical, philosophical, and power-related values. It is important to stress that even though these conceptions originated in antiquity they are still very popular, particularly in the largely majoritarian Hindu communities.

On the other hand, other religions and cultures have historically overlapped and partly blended with these traditions. From the beginning of the 13th century, with the advent of Islam and especially with the Mughals, the main language became Persian. Later on, the British domination produced a cultural interaction whose effects are decisive to this day. In addition, aspects of South Asian civilization that are rooted in a remote past can only be studied in their contemporary expressions. The large subaltern strata (defined by caste or as Adivasis, i.e. 'primitive inhabitants' or 'tribals') of the Hindu social hierarchy have not had an independent voice in the great literary and artistic tradition. Yet they have determined various aspects of South Asian culture, following complex processes that have been called 'Sanskritization' and 'Deshification' by scholars. Ideas and beliefs that came 'from below' became acceptable to the culturally dominant classes and thus widely shared.

While various aspects of the relationship between human and non-human animals in South Asia have been the focus of many studies, several issues are still unsolved and need to be re-examined or studied *ex-novo* in the light of recent research paradigms and newly acquired sources.

In brief, this is the broad context in which the articles of this issue of *Kervan* are framed. They touch upon a variety of crucial topics, proposing original interpretations and providing extensive bibliographies. By addressing the South Asian context in its multifaceted complexity, we hope that this volume will provide new insights and lay some much-needed foundations for future studies.

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