

NONHUMAN LIFEWORLDS IN URBAN INDIA

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We dedicate this paper to our close friend and colleague, the late Sujoy Chaudhuri, an academic who pioneered studies on human-animal interactions in India and was one of the first activists to speak against macaque translocations from the urban to the rural across the country.

Urbanisation is at the forefront of the challenges that India and several other nations of the Global South confront in the 21st century. Urban poverty is on the rise and rapid urbanisation is seriously outstripping most cities' capacities to provide adequate dwelling, staples and infrastructure for their growing populations. A rather neglected, albeit pivotal, dimension of Indian urban life pertains to its nonhuman denizens. These range from the *cultivated* species – with their upkeep constituting an important means through which the poor deal with urban precarity – to the *commensal* – living and ranging freely but intimately associated with human-provisioned food sources. The ubiquitous urban macaques, which live integrally in virtually every city and town of the Indian subcontinent, cohabiting comfortably with people but also unsettling the rhythms of the everyday and posing serious public health and governance concerns, constitute an example of a commensal species *par excellence*.

CITIES CAN BE CONCEPTUALISED AS NOT BEING EXCLUSIVELY HUMAN SPACES BUT NATURE-SOCIETY HYBRIDS, CO-CONSTITUTED THROUGH RELATIONS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND ANIMALS

The persistent presence of nonhuman animals in cities has led scholars to re-imagine the city as what Jennifer Wolch has termed a “zoöpolis”. Cities can be conceptualised as not being exclusively human spaces but nature-society hybrids, co-constituted through relations between people and animals. Yet, in spite

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of attempts to animate cities by alluding to nonhuman presence in the metropolis, there has been little engagement with what urbanisation might actually entail and mean for nonhuman animals themselves. How do these sentient creatures negotiate and learn to inhabit complex, dynamic environments, comprehending them according to their own knowledges, speeds and rhythms? In other words, what bearing does the urban have on the lifeworlds of animals and how can a comprehension of these lifeworlds contribute to a recasting of the urban?

We understand lifeworlds as akin to Jakob von Uexküll's concept of the *umwelt*. Contrary to the mechanistic currents of his day, von Uexküll argued that all beings experience their worlds through unique, embodied, sensory perspectives that are shaped by the physical and physiological makeup of their bodies. These worlds may be unfamiliar or strange to us but are imbued with meaning for the beings themselves, albeit according to their own registers, rhythms

and propensities. Von Uexküll's work has had a lasting influence on Western philosophy, from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, through to Deleuze. We reflect on some of these influences but inflect understandings of nonhuman lifeworlds through our own ethno-ethological work. What if the animal was not merely an abstract or rhetorical figure, as it becomes in Heidegger and Deleuze, but a living, breathing, fleshy, fingery creature that responds to and generates responses in the world? And what insights might a conversation between an ethologist, who has studied macaques for over twenty-five years, and a human geographer, examining the spatialities, politics and governance of the living and material world, yield to specifying and understanding nonhuman lifeworlds as they are made and unmade with and through the ebbs and flows of urban life?

We focus our labour on three aspects of nonhuman lifeworlds – animal urbanisation, nonhuman knowledges and the use of urban space by animals – to ground our enquiry. Our etho-geographical endeavour is to generate interactions between two conceptualizations of ethology: 1) as a mode of knowing the nonhuman, and 2) as the study of bodies and their capacity to affect other bodies (with a nod to Deleuze's reading of Spinoza).

Macaques are excellent candidates for understanding how nonhuman lifeworlds are urbanised and the governance challenges such processes pose. With approximately twenty-two species

distributed principally across Asia, macaques represent, arguably, the most adaptable and evolutionarily successful of all nonhuman primates. Several species exhibit an inherent tendency to gravitate towards human habitations, thus setting in motion an inexorable process of urbanisation of their lifeworlds. Two such Indian species are the rhesus macaque (*Macaca mulatta*) in the northern parts of the country and the bonnet macaque (*Macaca radiata*), endemic to peninsular India. We have been studying social evolution, individual behavioural traits, and cultural traditions in bonnet macaque populations for more than two decades now, particularly documenting differences in behavioural repertoires and practices across populations, social groups and individuals.

Truly "wild" macaque populations across both species are rarely being reported in recent times, while semi-urbanised populations are increasingly coming into conflict with human communities, largely over crop raiding. With approximately 500,000 animals across northern and north-eastern India, of which about fifty-five percent live in human habitations, rhesus macaques, in particular, present a major urban governance issue. New Delhi, India's capital, alone has c. 9,000 macaques, posing serious challenges to urban governance. As macaques disrupt the apparent comfort of everyday human life, the state has instituted a number of different measures to control and regulate macaques in the city. But what does this imply for the macaques themselves? How might such drastic human

action disrupt the lifeworlds of individuals, potentially unprepared by slow evolutionary histories to adapt to rapid processes of change, typically inflicted by urbanisation?

Our first concern is to examine processes of urbanisation, tracking how metabolic flows of commodities and waste results in transformation of macaque lifeworlds, and how our shared histories are constituted and sensed by both people and macaques. We should clarify here that urban metabolism is a broad term, variously referring to everything from material and energy flows to the circulation and intensification of capital in cities. In its various guises, metabolism provides a framework to study the interactions of natural and human systems in specific regions of our interest.

ALTHOUGH THERE HAS NOW BEEN A SHIFT FROM THE EARLIER SPATIO-TEMPORAL QUESTIONS OF NATURE IN THE CITY TO THOSE ABOUT THE URBANISATION OF NATURE, WE HAVE TYPICALLY BEEN SILENT ABOUT HOW URBANISATION ALTERS NONHUMAN LIFEWORLDS

Although there has now been a shift from the earlier spatio-temporal questions of nature *in* the city to those about the urbanisation *of* nature, viewed as a transformative *process*, we have typically been silent about how urbanisation alters nonhuman lifeworlds. How do the flows of commodities and waste, their incorporation into macaque diets, to consider an example, affect and alter the sentient experiences of urban animals? We argue that attending to animal

ethologies and possibly ethnographies generates much richer articulations of how nature is urbanised, and how such processes are ecologically and metabolically transformative.

Our own studies on macaques suggest three forms of transformation in animal lifeworlds brought about by urbanisation: 1) related to social organisation, 2) related to behavioural repertoires and profiles of individuals, and 3) related to long-term life-history strategies of these individuals. For example, the appearance of a novel unimale-multifemale social formation in the Bandipur and Mudumalai National Parks of southern India – characterised by dramatic changes in the three biological parameters listed above – seems to be primarily driven by nutritionally rich and spatio-temporally clustered human-provisioned food, increasingly available with urbanisation. Here, for the first time, we observed macaque groups as being composed by a single “dominant” male with multiple female companions or associates. This observation had not been made before, and, we argue, can be linked to the macaques’ entanglement in the metabolic flows of the city. Our long-term ethno-ethological work on this species has thus generated deep understandings of the urbanisation of nature, including transformations in the macaques’ immediate behavioural repertoires and long-term life-history strategies within their urban ecosystems, ways in which they encounter, apprehend and inhabit a rapidly changing world.

What then does urbanisation entail for the entourage of nonhuman beings that are increasingly composing our cities today? As an example, we must consider how changing food regimes and practices of provisioning – drivers of urbanisation – are leading to the appearance of particular cultures of movement and foraging in macaques, with its transformative potential being realised not just in terms of macaque ethologies but, more importantly, in terms of their evolution as well. One thus needs to understand more incisively what the commodities in question might mean to the animals themselves through relations fostered by their own proclivities. In turn, we need to attend to the ways in which commodities *affect* nonhuman practices of consumption and, consequently, the spatial circulation of such commodities through cities.

We also argue that intimately linked to such geographical

perspectives of the urbanisation of nature are the hitherto neglected historical narratives of nonhuman lifeworlds. If indeed urbanisation, as a process, has transformed macaque worlds, then questions arise about *animals' own histories* of urbanisation. Material geographies of urbanisation often presuppose humans, transcended from the natural world, as sole historical agents. Yet, it is evident that humans and animals inhabit the same immanent world and their mutual encounters are meaningful, not just for the people but for the macaques as well. We thus concur with Tim Ingold when he states in his book *Being Alive* that “just as much as humans have a history of their relations with animals, so also animals have a history of their relations with humans”.

MATERIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF URBANISATION OFTEN PRESUPPOSE HUMANS, TRANSCENDED FROM THE NATURAL WORLD, AS SOLE HISTORICAL AGENTS

Let us then briefly consider some nonhuman narratives. Across the Indian subcontinent, certain urban troops of both macaques and langurs appear to be more aggressive than are others of their same species, regardless of their species-typical behavioural predispositions, especially if their encounters with humans have continually involved persecution. Similarly, some populations express differential behaviours in regions where there have been histories of provisioning, as opposed to where they have not been exposed to such urbanised resources. Certain individual macaques, for example, are known to take away objects from pilgrims that have no direct food value and, in a process of commodity-exchange or bartering, use these as tokens, returning them to people in exchange for food. Finally, it may be challenging for us to ask whether, through observational learning in shared environments, macaque skills, knowledges and expertise cut across human-nonhuman divides. Thus, deviating from our own obsessive constructions of personal histories,

working closely “with” animals may now offer us some of the best possible indications of how such historical narratives can *alternatively* be told. These observations also offer the potential for rethinking the behaviours we consider uniquely human, thus philosophically dismantling the human/animal binary that remains dominant in humanist thought.

Second, we raise the issue of macaque knowledges, examining how they might matter to the working practices and controversies of governing the urban. We still do not know what and how animals learn, emulate and innovate when inhabiting complex urban environments but such insights are critical for our understanding of how animals become participants in socio-political matters of debate. Ethologists' engagements with animals' motivations, mechanisms of learning and formation of cultural traditions could thus pave the way to forge new modes of encounters that bring into focus specificities of nonhuman knowledges, their enactment and sustenance in urban settings.



Macaques seem capable of forming mental representations, generated by direct personal experience, and this capacity apparently underlies their interactions with both the mechanical as well as the social components of their immediate environment. This suggests a rather early evolutionary origin for fairly sophisticated cognitive capabilities, characterised by an objectified self with limited regulatory control over more subjective levels of self-awareness in these species. Intent and referentiality are also possibly at work when macaques communicate with one another through gestures or vocalisations. We have also documented novel, intentional and referential communication strategies, involving both gestures and vocalisation, when macaques establish functional links with people, as when they request food from humans in urbanised contexts. These gestures are intentional and possibly referential but they are also affective, evoking feelings of sympathy and concern in sentient humans. Unravelling complexities behind animal decision-making in such different contexts, especially with its implications for how they matter to or disrupt human scripts of management and control, would enable a far richer encapsulation of nonhuman action than those that have, so far, grouped such differential actions, adaptations and motivations into an undifferentiated category of “nonhuman agency”.

Finally, we attend to macaque spaces, asking how urban space and mobility might be conceptualised *differently* when animal movements and territories are foregrounded. The practices and logics through which nonhumans are subject to all manner of socio-spatial exclusions from cities, have long been the focus of animal geographies, which has laid emphasis on how animals are practically affected as “marginal” social groups, polluting and disruptive *occupants* of the urban where humans alone have the authority to live and work.

These principles operate strongly in state interventions to curtail and reduce human-macaque conflict in urban areas. In many Indian cities, for example, there have been widespread moves to translocate and “rehabilitate” rhesus macaques from the urban polis to rural commons, a strategy that has been at the centre of state responses to the urban “monkey menace”.

However, much of this at best “shifts the problem around” rather than coming up with a durable solution. In New Delhi, for instance, a High Court order in 2007 to shift “stray monkeys” in the city to the neighbouring Asola Bhatti Sanctuary has led to c. 19,000 monkeys being translocated in the past decade alone. This has, however, resulted in relocated macaques moving into nearby residential areas much to the chagrin of local communities. Everyday life therein is affected: children avoid sitting next to windows in schools in fear of macaques and residents have begun to cover their roofs with thorny branches to prevent macaques from jumping onto them.

HOW DO ANIMALS TRANSFORM AND APPROPRIATE THE ENVIRONMENT FOR THEIR OWN, OR, IN OTHER WORDS, HOW ARE ANIMAL SPACES, DECIDED UPON BY PEOPLE, INEXORABLY, BUT GENTLY, REPLACED BY BEASTLY PLACES THAT NONHUMANS THEMSELVES ESTABLISH

Considering appropriation as a uniquely human form of control over territory implies that ultimately only humans can own whilst animals are exclusively ownable. This renders particular forms of intervention such as relocation legible. We argue that such resolve in relocation is reflective of perhaps a wider trend in India where “problem” urban macaques are translocated down the chain of the Indian socio-political hierarchy, with troops caught in prime urban centres being released in city suburbs, followed by further trapping and relocation to rural and forested hinterlands. Considering control over territory as a solely human

activity also overlooks how, as Jennifer Wolch has put it, “animals (themselves) are critical to the making of places and landscapes”. How do animals transform and *appropriate* the environment for their own, or, in other words, how are animal spaces, decided upon by people, inexorably, but gently, replaced by beastly places that nonhumans themselves establish?

The lifeworld for us, humans, is inherently spatial, and a spatial politics of lifeworlds emerges precisely through this friction: humans attempt to contain it whilst nonhuman life spills and overflows. We believe this to be a productive arena for future interdisciplinary exploration, examining urbanisation as a continuous de- and re-territorialisation of space through modes of composition and movement between people and macaques. This would enable a more sophisticated analysis of urban ecologies and also potentially generate new ways of thinking about the future in contexts where macaques and humans inhabit common worlds with shared histories.

TO TAKE THESE CONCERNS SERIOUSLY ADVOCATES FOR RETHINKING NOT ONLY THE URBAN, BUT THE HUMAN, THE ANIMAL, AND OUR METHODS OF GOVERNANCE

Our arguments thus pave the way for vital insights into two glaring lacunae in thinking about urban life in the 21st century: eliciting what urbanisation might entail for animals themselves and evoking animals’ geographies of the urban, with and against the grain of human design. Setting these concepts in motion is one way through which the politics of urban planning and governance can be ecologised and has much to offer for future scholarship on urban political ecologies. It enables tracking these sentient and sensitive ecologies in ways that are attentive to nonhuman lifeworlds, not just as something to be added in or simply retrieved but, from the outset, fundamentally constitutive of the urban.

For philosophers, this mode of enquiry challenges the dominant humanist assumptions at the base of much thinking regarding urban studies, planning, and architecture. To take these concerns seriously advocates for rethinking not only the urban, but the human, the animal, and our methods of governance from the ground up to include the broad assemblage of sentient actors that constitute urban space. Let us then look forward excitedly to the challenges and opportunities for lively engagements – of behavioural ecologies of the nonhuman with typically human-dominated, political ecologies – in the urban. Our entwined futures, and possible common worlds, are here and now.

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