

# Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East

## Nonhuman Governance: The Violence and Benevolence in South Asian Animism

--Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>Taking the Sundarbans forests of India as a starting point, I show how several animated, nonhuman agents of the region guide both resource use and social relationships through a set of rules known as the 'rules of the jungle.' While such deities, demons and spirits—that is “cosmic polities”—undeniably govern life across the landscape of South Asia, I show how nonhuman forms of governance alongside providing an ecological consciousness are also capable of exclusion, discrimination and outright violence. Consequently, the South Asian context provides an important cautionary tale to the blind embrace of animism, as the sole saviour of our ecological crisis by revealing a spectrum of violence within certain kinds of animistic ontologies. Simultaneously I show how Western repertoires of thought reveal framing devices that transcend dualism and are in fact the precursors of contemporary environmental consciousness. Ultimately, this essay proposes a bricolage of ontologies and realities without entrenching them in a particular identity of caste, tribe, 'indigeneity', 'the West' or the non-West.</p>
<b>Suggested Reviewers:</b>	<p>Ambika Aiyudurai, PhD  Assistant Professor, IIT Gandhinagar: Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar  a.ambika@iitgn.ac.in  Ambika Aiyudurai has just published in 2021 an ethnography of the Mishmi Community in Arunachal Pradesh, India which resonates with my research in the Sundarbans. I draw on her work for several convergences but also have key departures in thinking about animism in the context of South Asia and I think she will be extremely helpful in strengthening my work.</p> <hr/> <p>Mukul Sharma, PhD  Professor, Ashoka University  mukul.sharma@ashoka.edu.in  Mukul Sharma has done extensive research on Dalit Environmentalism in India and has proposed the idea of 'eco-castiesm' which I draw on. His book Caste and Nature has been extremely useful to me in nuancing my arguments regarding the Brahminical conservatism that can be found in animism and environmental movements in India.</p>

## Nonhuman Governance: The Violence and Benevolence in South Asian Animism

The current ecological crisis and its accompanying environmental consciousness has prodded many to reject Western dualism and instead embrace indigenous animism. Based on fieldwork in the Sundarbans Forest of India and through comparisons across the country as well as from examples in ‘the West’, this essay problematizes the valorisation of ontologically distinct animistic life-worlds. I argue that such a dichotomized understanding is problematic not only because it ignores ‘animism’ within several ‘Western’ repertoires of thought and action but also glosses over the hierarchy, exclusion and forms of predation within animistic ontologies in South Asia and elsewhere. I detail three examples from Western repertoires of thought that reveal framing devices that transcend dualism and are in fact the precursors of contemporary environmental consciousness. In addition, taking as a starting point the Sundarbans mangrove forests, home to several human and nonhuman inhabitants which includes a population of 5 million people belonging to a range of lower caste (Dalit), tribe (*adivasis*) and religious groups, Bengal tigers, a tiger demon and a forest deity, I show how several animated, nonhuman agents of the Sundarbans guide both resource use and social relationships through a set of rules known as the ‘rules of the jungle.’ While such deities, demons and spirits—that is “cosmic polities”—undeniably govern life across the landscape of South Asia, I show how nonhuman forms of governance alongside providing an ecological consciousness are also capable of exclusion, discrimination and outright violence. The South Asian context provides an important cautionary tale to the blind embrace of animism, as the sole saviour of our ecological crisis, and my essay reveals a spectrum of violence—from the subtle restrictions that the ‘rules of the jungle’ impose on women to the outright domination of Brahminical, Hindu ideologies that ‘naturalize’ caste and promote killings in the name of protection. Ultimately, this essay proposes a bricolage of ontologies and realities without entrenching them in a particular identity of caste, tribe, ‘indigeneity’, ‘the West’ or the non-West.

Keywords: Nonhuman; Animism, South Asia, Mythology, Violence, Conviviality, Ontology

It is for certain that there is an ecological crisis unfolding. Accompanying this crisis, is the certainty that the root cause of the current apocalypse is ‘Western’ Cartesian separations between nature and culture and in order to ‘save nature’ and reconstitute human and nonhuman relations, we ought to ‘reclaim animism’.<sup>1</sup> This essay attempts to cast doubt on these second set of certainties by breaking this stratification between ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’. First, I question the commonplace idea that ‘the West’ is to be blamed for the catastrophic conditions of our contemporary age, by arguing that ‘the West’ too has a large and complex repertoire of thought and practice that coalesces human and nonhuman relations in a multiplicity of ways, many of which may be seen as legitimate precursors to contemporary environmental consciousness. Second, this essay cautions against the embrace of animism and animistic ontologies as being the only answer to the current environmental apocalypse. This essay will elucidate via examples set in South Asia that animism can be exclusionary and responsible for upholding hierarchies, forms of discrimination, and sowing the seeds of divisive politics and violence. The split between ‘the West’ and its dualism versus ontologically distinct animistic life-worlds is problematic not only because it ignores the ‘animism’ within Western traditions of thought but also glosses over the exclusionary politics and forms of predation within animistic ontologies from the so called ‘rest of the world.’

In the past decade there has been a plethora of scholarship on the nonhuman within the disciplines of anthropology as well as in the broader humanities. In South Asia, ordinary life—not just the way in which it is lived but also written about—is suffused with the nonhuman. The existence of these entanglements is pervasive and ubiquitous in stories, mythologies and quotidian life. Across the subcontinent people—not withstanding caste, class or religion—have different forms of relating to animals, gods, demons, spirits and the supernatural. The mundane is full of miracles, and the miraculous a part of ordinary life. Despite this deeply enchanted landscape where animacy is given to all kinds of life-worlds—scholarship from the region has little to say about the separate ontologies and framing devices that govern people’s life. In comparison, other regions, such as Latin America have by now a long-standing tradition of thought that has proposed a bricolage of ontologies and worldviews from multinaturalism<sup>2</sup> to perspectivism<sup>3</sup> with scholars such as Philip Descola, Viveiros De Castro, Eduardo Kohn, Marisol De Cadena who have revealed, through their distinct field sites, the radically distinct ontologies of being, seeing and relating to the world that separate their interlocutors from the dualism of ‘the West.’

Motivated by the landscape of India, and by way of contributing to a South Asian perspective on questions of the nonhuman, this essay contends that by simply being better attuned

to nonhuman forms of governance doesn't automatically imply a form of conviviality, nonviolence or ecological consciousness in forms of relatedness between humans and nonhumans. This essay is not interested in rejecting animism, nor in providing a defence of 'the West,' but instead should be read as a cautionary tale for those seduced by a more than human ontology of animism because it reveals that certain forms of animism (replete in South Asia) are complicit in sustaining Brahmanical approaches to the environment whereby the Hindu Right's relationship to 'sacred landscapes' is imbricated with violence.

The first half of the essay draws on ethnography conducted in the Sundarbans forest of India. Based on participant-observation conducted with those who 'do the jungle,' I show how a set of non-state rules (*niyams*) guide both social relations and resource use. The source of these rules are 'cosmic polities'—deities and demons—who are not only responsible for the safety, preservation and vitality of life but can as easily cause death. While this essay proposes to take nonhuman forms of governance seriously, I contend that acknowledging the power of more-than-human sovereigns need not necessarily imply a more convivial relationship between humans and nonhumans. Examples from South Asia reveal how animism and 'indigenous' environmental consciousness often uphold caste hierarchies, essentialize 'tribes' and promote a politics intertwined with exclusion and violence. Like different variants of a virus, the particular strand of South Asian animism has within it the capacity to unleash a broad spectrum of violence which ranges from the subtle such as restrictions on the movement of women to the outright murder in the case of lynching Muslims and Dalits in the name of protecting sacred animals such as the cow<sup>4</sup>.

From complicating animism and highlighting the contradictions with it, the second half of this essay draws on three examples from Western repertoires of thought that have a deeply intertwined relationship to the nonhuman breaking down any clear-cut separation between 'the West' and 'the rest.' The first example is the Bestiary, a compendium of beasts from Northern Europe in the Middle Ages, which Susan Crane analyses as simultaneously using dualism, analogism and animism as a framing device; second I draw on 'green writing' specifically with regard to English and American Romantic Poets who frame 'the Earth as a dwelling-place for all living things'<sup>5</sup> which is very reminiscent of contemporary environmental consciousness and lastly, I cite the example of paganistic traditions and rituals found across Europe, and specifically fleshed out in relation to modern-day France by Graham Robb,<sup>6</sup> showing how 'cosmic polities' are also part of France's inheritance.

Kant's proclamation of human supremacy over that of animals is but one 'Western' tradition of thought that has become hegemonic of the diverse archive of thought and practice in the West that coalesces human and nonhuman relations in a diversity of ways revealing the

bricolage of ontologies and framing devices. Similarly, not all variants of animism should be reclaimed. As this essay will highlight through examples from India, particular strands of animism can be caste-blind, have the potential to essentialize caste and ‘indigeneity’ and play a leading role in the construction of an exclusive and partial environmental politics, which is Brahminical, Hindu, conservative<sup>7</sup> and the apotheosis of violence. Before expanding on the conceptual contributions of this essay, I begin first by introducing the site where I conducted my long-term ethnographic research.

### **The Sundarbans: A Forest of Refugees**

I conducted 22 months of fieldwork on an island named Bali in the Sundarbans forests of India, a national park and conservation hotspot. This region is home to 5 million human residents and several nonhuman inhabitants which includes Bengal tigers, crocodiles, sharks, several thousands of birds and fish; a tiger demon named Dakshin Ray and the protectress of the forest, a sylvan deity Bonbibi.

The history of this region is intertwined with a history of displacement and migration. The majority of current day residents are environmental and political refugees. Joya Chatterji<sup>8</sup> estimates that a total of 3.9 million people came from East Bengal, renamed East Pakistan, to modern day West Bengal between the years 1946 to 1970. Most of the newcomers were Hindus—some were upper caste, but the majority belonged to Scheduled Castes (SC)—*Namasudras*, *Pods*, *Rajbongshis*, and *Jalia Kaibartas*—and were peasants, labourers and fishermen<sup>9</sup>. The majority of households in the village where I was based were *Poundra Khoitro*, a Scheduled Caste group who originally migrated from current day Bangladesh during the Partition of India in 1947 all the way up to the 1970s and 80s in the lead up to and aftermath of the creation of Bangladesh.

Today 40,000 people live on Bali Island. Difference is indexed by the use of the term *shomaaaj*, a word that means community but also connotes a migration history. People identified themselves as belonging to one of four different communities: *Dholeypuri*, *Baaspuri*, *Baraipuri*, and *Midnapori*. All of these refer not to caste groups, but to places in present-day Bangladesh or West Bengal. The majority of people in my neighbourhood of Bali No. 9 also had official government caste certificates designating them as members of the *Poundro Kshatriya* sub-castes, one of the many hundreds of Scheduled Caste communities (equivalent to Dalits, formerly known as untouchables). Despite being categorised in this homogenizing way, they are hugely heterogenous in terms of socio-economic status and level of education. Some of the biggest landowners in the village, with large brick homes in the island’s interior, are *Poundra Kshatriya*. However, the majority are poor and

landless, with mud homes on the edges of the river, and personal histories of political and ecological dispossession.

Rup Kumar Barman,<sup>10</sup> who has written one of the only histories of the *Poundras*, traces their social mobility from the 1920s when, through a social movement they began demanding *Kshatriya* or high caste status. The movement's initial demands were denied by census officers. In 1933 the Government of Bengal published a list of 76 "Depressed Classes," in which they were included. After a relentless struggle by social activists, the *Poundras* were eventually granted higher status by the Government of India in 1956 and became known as *Poundra Kshatriya*<sup>11</sup>. The fusion of Scheduled Caste and *Kshatriya* or higher caste identity has created a mixed identity among the *Poundras*.

The adjacent village where I was based had fifty odd households that belonged to *Scheduled Tribe* (ST) groups—but in the context of the Sundarbans these were *Mundas*, *Santhals* and *Bhumij*—brought from other parts of India, current day Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, by colonial administrators to clear the forests. They were not 'indigenous' to the Sundarbans. In the neighbourhood where I was based, the majority of *Poundra* men and women 'do the jungle,' that is, they fish, collect crabs and honey in the forest alongside which they live. For many of them, their parents and grandparents have been 'doing the jungle' while others are new entrants having begun this forest-based livelihood in the past two to three decades.

Since the passing of 1972 Wildlife Protection Act of India (WPA) along with the proclamation of the region as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, the forests opposite the villages—a national park—is heavily patrolled by the Border Security Force and the Forest Department for national security and 'saving' India's national animal the tiger. In opposition to conservation practices that disadvantage the livelihoods of those who 'do the jungle,' a whole host of NGOs, fishers unions, slogan-shouting national and local level activists rally for people's rights to the forests. As a result, the region's main stakeholders span the spectrum from the "camp" for wildlife protection and the "camp" claiming to speak (to varying degrees) for the people.

Beyond these camps and their distinct views on forest governance, and the coalitions and shifting solidarities in between, the first part of this essay proposes another source of forest governance, referred to by crab collectors, honey collectors and fishermen as the 'rules of the jungle' (*jongoler niyam*) which emanate from the deity Bonbibi, a tiger-demon Dakshin Rai, and are crucial to the governance of the region but have been largely ignored by both conservationists and rights-based activists.

## **‘Cosmic Polities’ as having ‘Power Over Life’:**

I begin with one of the central myths of the Sundarbans forest, around which revolve several long-standing tropes of the region: Dhonai is a wealthy merchant who enters the territory of the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai. In return for providing seven boat loads of honey and wax to Dhonai, the hungry tiger-demon demands a human sacrifice. The merchant, although ambivalent, is propelled by his greed to sacrifice a poor young boy—the son of widow, named Dukhey—to the tiger-demon. The young boy Dukhey just before being devoured by the tiger-demon calls out to the mother of the forest Bonbibi. Bonbibi arrives on the scene to save the young boy from the tiger-demon. Bonbibi is proclaimed the sovereign of the forest, who provides fishermen, crab collectors, and honey collectors protection from Dokkhin Rai.

This is a highly abridged version of the origin myth of the forest deity Bonbibi and her tussle with Dokkhin Rai for sovereignty over the Sundarbans forest. Bonbibi and Dokkhin Rai are known throughout the region of 5 million inhabitants, and universally revered by the many thousands – Hindus, Muslims and *adivasis* – who enter the mangrove creeks to fish, collect crabs and honey in the Sundarbans forests<sup>12</sup>. The two have territorial sovereignty of the forest. If one follows Bonbibi’s rules and injunctions, enters the jungle out of need, ‘empty handed’ like a ‘beggar’ she will not only provide protection but also the fruits of her forest, productivity and prosperity. But if one disobeys the ethos of the forest and is tempted to be ‘greedy’, there could be death at the hands of the tiger-demon.

In the past decades, writings on these two figures have mushroomed such that the two are also known much beyond the Sundarbans. Early modern literature of Bengal, known as *punthi* literature has been written about by several scholars both in Bangla and in English. Bonbibi’s mythology has been popularized by the novelist Amitav Ghosh who writes about her in his books *The Hungry Tide* and *Junglenama*. Annu Jalais in her book *Forest of Tigers* details the Bonbibi myth, its fascinating religious genealogy and symbolism, and the important role she plays in the lives of those ‘do the jungle.’ Religious historian Tony Stewart has transliterated her origin story and that of several other *pirs*, saints and religious figures in his book *Witness to Marvels*. From folklorists such as Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar<sup>13</sup> to those studying ritual and everyday Islam<sup>14</sup> to numerous others interested in folklore and popular religion<sup>15</sup> have interpreted Bonbibi’s mythology in diverse ways and have provided rich historical overviews embedding her story in the confluence of Sufi Islam and Bhakti traditions. I draw on these scholars to argue for Bonbibi and Dokkhin Rai to be seen as protective and punitive “cosmic polities,” who have “power over life.” They govern resource

use and social relationships through injunctions, taboos, prescriptions and ‘rules’ found across different rural and urban landscapes of South Asia and the world.

For example, if you ask a child in the Sundarbans where their parents are, and if the parents happen to be fishing or collecting crabs in the river creeks across from their village, the response will be ‘they’ve gone to beg.’ Going into the mangrove forests to ‘do the jungle’ is tantamount to ‘going begging’.

Sandip da is *Poundra Khoitra* man who has been doing the jungle for 25 years, explained,

“when we are in the ‘Mother’s Storehouse’ (*Ma’ar Khamar*) we become like renouncers...we must go empty handed (*khali hatien*) like a mendicant (*bhiken*) into her jungle...it is important to take only that which you need, for she forbids you to be greedy.”

Asha boudhi is his wife, with whom he had a ‘love marriage’ from the Midnipuri community added:

“If you had come to the house while your dada [referring to Sandip da] was collecting honey, I wouldn’t have given you a place to sit or offered anything for you to eat or drink...because they have gone to beg, so you see, we ourselves have to live like beggars at home. It is risky work [*rixser kaaj*], and so we have to follow the rules to stay safe [*bechey rakbaar niyam*]. There are many rules of the jungle [*jongoler niyam*]...if I begin explaining them to you, night will fall [before I can finish].”

The word *jongol* literally means jungle, and in the context of my field site includes rivers and creeks interspersed among the tidal maze of sandbanks forested by many varieties of mangrove trees. The word *nyam* in both Hindi and Bengali translates into rules or observances. In the usage of the word ‘*jongoler niyam*,’ or ‘rules of the jungle’ Sundarban residents are referring to a set of propositions, proscription and prohibitions followed by households that depend on the forests for their livelihood. The forest is referred to by those who eke a livelihood from it as *Ma’ar khamar*. The word *khamar* literally translates as ‘granary’ or ‘storehouse’ and *Ma’ar khamar* refers to the ‘common storehouse of the mother.’ The mother refers to Bonbibi, who has territorial sovereignty over the ‘common storehouse’—a place to be entered only in times of need.

There are many rules and in what follows, like Asha boudhi, I will recount a small selection of the copious number of do’s and don’ts. Ubiquitous to all those who ‘do the jungle’ was the understanding that one should only step on the forest floor after giving prayers to Bonbibi. Crossing over from the village into the forest was akin to entering a sacred space, which called for a certain comportment, a form of reverence and a heightened concentration in order to stay safe while in a dangerous forest. Nothing could be discarded on the forest floor. One did not spit, defecate or throw anything from the fishing boat onto *Maa’r khamor*. Even the ash and soot from the cooking was disposed only in the river, not in the forest. One had to be careful not to leave



any personal traces. Not even nails or hair could be left in the jungle, and if anything had to be discarded, such as the butt of a *beedi* (cheap cigarette), it was carefully wrapped in a leaf, and buried. Even if one had to defecate, it was done on a leaf, facing the direction of the tide, or in the river to avoid profaning the forest floor. Household worries around debt, land and marital affairs must also be left behind when entering the jungle. One must forget feuds, quarrels, and disagreements within the village, and avoid feelings of jealousy or anger. Such village and household anxieties often led to men and women to be distracted, and prevented them from entering into a state of deep concentration while in the jungle. 'Doing the jungle' required both skill and focus, akin perhaps to an acrobatic walking a tightrope, where the slightest distraction could lead to a fall, injury and even death.

Though physically separated, those family members who stay at home and those who cross over into the mangrove creeks of the jungle were ritually conjoined in a similar ascetic practice. Both men and women 'do the jungle' however the majority are men. The wives, at home, would ritually transform themselves and the household into that of a beggar or mendicant. As Asha boudhi tells me in the vignette above, for the women at home there is another set of intricate observances that ought to be followed. No special food could be consumed. No chillies were eaten. If a visitor or beggar came to their home, they were not offered a mat to sit on, or provided any food or drink. No food was lent to neighbours during this period. This contrasted with the normal practice of showering generous hospitality on visitors and neighbours. This is because for the duration of the time that the men have 'gone to beg' from Bonbibi, the women too have to convert themselves into beggars. Wives were furthermore not allowed to do any of their quotidian routines of self-care such as putting red vermillion (*shindur*) in the parting of their hair, combing and oiling their hair, clipping their nails, and washing their clothes or cooking during the day. They could not be seen roaming around the village's public spaces and especially not the village market. If the men of the household had gone to collect honey, with its greater time on the forest floor and heightened exposure to tiger attacks, the wives adhered to even stricter practices. The prohibitions of *jongoler niyam* gave men the peace of mind that their wives were not having visitors, meeting people in the village bazaar, or in any way enjoying the potentially threatening company of others while they were away. I return to these restrictions from the point of view of the women in a later section, but it should suffice to say that these rules were both a part of quotidian ritual life and the moral injunctions were reinforced and expressed through a variety of stories and anecdotes.

Take for example, Shankar da's narration of an incident that happened to him the previous honey collecting season. Shankar da was born in current day Bangladesh and came to the

Sundarbans as a young boy in the 1970s. He belongs to the *Poundra Khoitra* community and has been doing the jungle for the past fifteen years.

“A group [of honey collectors] will walk a path...past a huge honeycomb and will ignore it...it is not like they are blind, but in the jungle, no one else will get that which is yours. It will be yours, if it is meant to be. So many times so many honeycombs are just walked past by people [collecting honey], why don't they get it?...Because it is not for them to have, it is for someone else...I have seen this myself several times. This too is a rule of the jungle [*jongoler niyam.*]”

There were innumerable stories like this, with several variations and interpretations, that expressed Bonbibi's logic about what one might receive. Another favourite story, which children especially loved to narrate, centred on the fact that large honeycombs in the forests were thought to belong to the tiger demon Dokkhin Rai. Dokkhin Rai's honeycombs are meant to tempt you. They are unusually large, hang low from the trees, and are bursting with copious quantities of honey. These honeycombs are precisely those that one is supposed to leave untouched. If you tap their honey, it is believed that Rai in the form of a tiger will attack you. One feared death and in order to avoid it one aspired to follow the 'rules of the jungle'.

Another related interpretation of these honeycombs is that they are tests of one's greed. Bonbibi advises against greed, and so something so big and easy to obtain ought to be left alone. Binayak Mistry, an elderly man, had spent his life 'doing the jungle' and offered one of my favourite interpretations for the Dokkhin Rai myth. He corroborated that he had seen hundreds of accessible, unbelievably large honeycombs that perhaps did belong to the demon. However, the reason why he always left them was not only out of fear of a tiger attack, but as a principle of sharing with other teams of collectors. Leaning in, with an introspective whisper, he said: “Other honey collectors left some for you and you left some for them... and this too was the rule of the jungle.” Binayak Mistry's interpretation didn't deny the possibility of the supernatural—in fact the tiger and the tiger-demon are often one and the same being—but his guiding ethos to leave honeycombs was also out of the awareness that the jungle was indeed a commons that had to provide for everyone's families and not just one's own. It was as if Binayak Mistry had read Levi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*, where myth was just a story, and simultaneously a story that gave one the means to conduct life. Marshall Sahlins, following Arthur Maurice Hocart, argues that the 'original political society' is comprised of 'cosmic polities', that is, it is a society “ordered and governed by divinities, ancestors, species-masters, and other metapersons endowed with life-death powers over the human population”<sup>16</sup>. In his review of this phenomenon,<sup>17</sup> Sahlins shows the common trope of gods, deities, spirits or other meta-persons having territorial sovereignty—such as over the sea, the forest or gardens—which they exercise through prohibitions and taboos similar to Bonbibi's

“rules of the jungle.” When restrictions and rules are honoured through proper moral and social conduct, abundant harvests, better rains, successful hunts, and well-being of life itself is granted. When violated, misfortune, harm and death result.

Much like the ‘rules of the jungle’ that govern social order and resource use in the Sundarbans, Ambika Aiyadurai’s recent ethnography set among the Mishmi community of Arunachal Pradesh describes a range of taboos set by spirits that is akin to a kind of “ritual where the Mishmi enter into a ‘social contract’ with animals and spirits.”<sup>18</sup> She contends that “the Mishmi’s social world is a network of their associations with humans and non-human beings (animals, rivers, birds, and spirits).”<sup>19</sup> Drawing on the work of Tim Ingold, she states that hunter-gatherers are collectors of whatever nature has to offer and “that they see their surroundings as ‘alive’ and inanimate objects as having life.”<sup>20</sup> We learn from Aiyadurai that for the Mishmi hunting is an ancestral and spiritual activity which entails following taboos and ritual observances during and after hunting. The spirits are propitiated with the help of a ritual performed just before the Mishmi enter the ‘spiritual gate’ of the hunting grounds. Once they have crossed over this ‘gate’, much like the ‘rules of the jungle’, certain taboos, rules and prohibitions are followed as a form of respect to the spirit world. Following restrictions allow for a good hunt and the mutuality of the relationship between the Mishmi hunters and the Ngōlō spirit: the most important spirit among the Mishmis believed to live in the high mountains and thick forests. We also learn that tigers are conceived of as brothers and there is a strict taboo on killing or hunting a tiger. Mishmi mythology reinforces this as do ritual practices. This extraordinary ethnography shows not only the agentive nature of the spirits, but a relationship of exchange among the Mishmi and the spirits which includes code names, rituals, prayers, restrictions and are indeed a form of non-state governmentality. We see such an analysis in Mauss as well for whom spirits were “the real owners of goods and things in this world” and it was with them that exchange was necessary.<sup>21</sup>

To my mind, the most appealing and expansive conceptualization of the ways in which the nonhuman governs life was given by the neglected though pioneering British anthropologist of divine kingship, Arthur Maurice Hocart who states that the ‘original appearance’ of government was not king, prime minister, treasurer but ‘organizations to promote life, fertility, prosperity’<sup>22</sup> Hocart was interested in ‘cosmic polities’ and the role of ritualization for the pursuit of the good life where “human societies were engaged in cosmic systems of governmentality even before they instituted anything like a political state of their own”<sup>23</sup> He stated that “it is not government that man wants...it is life he wants”<sup>24</sup> The “original political society” is one of cosmic polities, very similar to the likes of Bonbibī, Dokkhin Rai and Ngōlō who have both life-giving and death-dealing powers.

South Asia is dotted with tens of thousands of place-based and livelihood-based divinities. From rituals, “superstitions,” to the role of mythology in metaphors, memory and ethical deliberations, it is a region which has always been deeply enchanted, with religion and magic that have a grip over ordinary life.<sup>25</sup> This phenomena has been described in India by several anthropologists in a range of ways, and any accounting of this phenomena—much like the copious ‘rules of the jungle’ can only be selective in nature. It has been conceived of as a “sacral polity” by Jonathan Parry<sup>26</sup> who was drawing from Mauss—taken up by Shah<sup>27</sup> among the Munda *adivasis* in Jharkhand; Appadurai and Breckenridge through an analysis of south Indian temples conceive the deity as a paradigmatic sovereign<sup>28</sup>; Ann Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar have conceived of the power of deities and *devtas* (gods) as “divine conservation” in Rajasthan<sup>29</sup>; Nurit-Bird David<sup>30</sup> conceptualizes these forces amongst the Nayaka hunter-gathers in South India by revisiting the scholarship on “animism.” Indira Arumugam<sup>31</sup> writes about the role of animal sacrifice in Tamil Nadu as revolving around production, reproduction and the social reproduction of life. In Northern India from Karin Gagné’s<sup>32</sup> monograph set in the upper reaches of the Himalayas to Radhika Govindarajan’s ethnography set in Utrakhand<sup>33</sup>, people’s notions of the reproductivity of livelihoods and life is governed by various gods, goddesses, deities, and demons.

Moving closer to my own field site and as part of the same broader deltaic landscape where I conducted research, Laura Bear,<sup>34</sup> in her research with bureaucrats, shipyard workers, and pilots on the Hooghly River in West Bengal, also argues for the importance of ethical framings, embedded in ritual associations, to fully conceive of the productivity of the river. Market logics around speculation, predictive technologies and debt fall short of capturing the way in which the river was imagined and navigated as a productive site by those who worked on it. The river was, in fact, never called the Hooghly but was known as Ma Ganga, the goddess of the Ganges. As Bear shows, ritual and ethical associations around Ma Ganga are crucial to any analysis of the river’s economic governance and to broader ideas of vitality.

Bhrigupati Singh<sup>35</sup> has contributed to a different entry point into what I am referring to as a government of ‘cosmic polities’ by catalyses the concept of political theologies to surpass the dichotomy of the religious from the secular. Singh conceives of a “political theology” in order to move beyond the way in which this concept has been steeped in European political thought in relation to a god or *devta* named Thakur Baba also in Rajasthan. He defines the life-giving and death dealing power of Thakur Baba as “a political theology of sovereignty as composed of relations of force and contract, at varying thresholds of life.”<sup>36</sup> In the landscape of South Asia, Hocartesian ‘cosmic-polities’ are neither restricted to rural societies nor egalitarian societies, and

Anand Taneja<sup>37</sup> identifies the practice of seeking justice from *jinn*s in the Mughal ruins of Firoz Shah Kotla in contemporary Delhi as a variation of a ‘political theology’ of Indo-Islamic kingship.

In fact “cosmic polities” do not only belong to a lower caste or *adivasi* pantheon of gods, goddesses and demons, and several upper-caste Hindus activate folklore and religious mythology as a form of mobilising the welfare and protection of humans and nonhumans. For instance, take the case of Vrindavan, the folkloric birthplace of lord Krishna, an example provided in Mukul Sharma’s book *Caste and Nature*. The region of Vrindavan underwent the Vrindavan Forest Revival Project with the support of WWF which “vividly used the imagery of Krishna as a symbol of environmental purity and beauty in order to involve Hindus in the conservation project.”<sup>38</sup> The main proponent of the Vrindavan Project and a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) invoked the *Manusmriti*—the Hindu law book—to defend and entrench certain traditional caste-based methods of waste disposal.<sup>39</sup>

Alongside the conservation efforts such as the planting of trees around the pilgrimage route, *parikerama marg*, Mukul Sharma’s detailed analysis of the Vrindavan project and the way it was received by a large Dalit population (Chamar, Balmiki, Kori, Khatik and Dhobhi) reveals the ways in which the mobilisation of gods and goddesses—in this case Lord Krishna—can also be embedded in a politics of exclusion and discrimination. This project perpetuated manual scavenging by Dalits for its sewage system, and its proponents glorified past technologies of waste disposal in order to entrench Brahminism and exclude Dalits. This brings me to the next section of the essay in which I highlight the political perils of nonhuman governance in the context of South Asia.

### **Violent Animism:**

The relationship between religious beliefs and ecological ethics has been explored in scholarship in relation to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism<sup>40</sup> and recently there has been a resurgence of interest in animism,<sup>41</sup> with several scholars looking to it as the way forward from our current ecological crisis. Mayanthi Fernando in her essay (this volume) says in relation to animism that indigenous relational ontologies, which resist the strictures of monotheism and rational sciences “are increasingly held out as our best hope for living in the ruins of capitalism, climate change, and the Anthropocene.”<sup>42</sup> Citing several scholars who have propounded the benefits of animism she writes, “we *must* attend to animism because it provides a way forward for all of us.”<sup>43</sup>

I agree, that we must attend to animism, however I also show that particular strands of South Asian animism are deeply regressive, especially for certain sections of society, often the already marginalized. Across India, the worshipping of ‘sacred groves’<sup>44</sup> and the ideas of ‘divine conservation’ taken together are animistic ontologies that have, by default, allowed for an ecological consciousness. However, as the current ecological crisis condemns dualism (nature versus culture separations) and embraces as the way forward, the framing device of animism, it is important to be forewarned of what is perhaps a spectrum of violence within animism, which ranges from the subtle to the brazen.

First, let us recall how the ‘rules of the jungle’ impose restrictions in the movement of women while the men of the household are away. Like in the case of the women who stay back at home while the men are ‘doing the jungle’ in the mangrove creeks, Mishmi women also have strict restrictions and in their case are not allowed to hunt together. The gendered politics in relation to nonhuman forms of governance at the level of the household and village complicates *jongoler niyam* from being any sort of “ecofeminist fable”<sup>45</sup> and instead it has the potential to entrench gender relations that can be deeply unequal. However, it should also be stated that my own findings from the Sundarbans as well as Aiyudurai’s ethnography both reveal that these rules are not static. Moral injunctions are being revised, eroded and adapted to and in both contexts men and women follow the rules and taboos selectively. While the ‘rules of the jungle’ in the Sundarbans served to restrain wives while their men were in absentia, it seemed as if women were changing the *niyams* according to the changing times too, making small adjustments to what was allowed and what was not.

Women in the Sundarbans were not just victims of a restraining set of household norms and forest rules. Piyali, the lady I lived with, used to have long phone conversations with her lover—a migrant in Gujarat—while her partner<sup>46</sup> was away in the forest collecting crabs. These phone flirtations, lasting hours, never happened when her partner Kamal da was at home. When I asked about the *jongoler niyam* and whether she thought she was breaking them, she said she wouldn’t have these chats while Kamal da went honey collecting—which was more dangerous and therefore the rules more important, but that during crab collection it was “all right” (*cholbey*). Even during the days Kamal da collected crabs in the creeks, Piyali followed most of the rules of the jungle but selectively broke a few. On one particular occasion she said exasperatedly, “how much are we women supposed to keep doing? For how long are we to continue these [things] that people before us did...don’t you think things are different today?” Piyali oscillated between following rules, praising them to me but also bitterly complaining about them. Bonbibi’s ethics and practices are constantly reinterpreted as landscapes, labour relations, household relations and supply chains interact. Women, constrained by the rules, are defying them in accordance with their desires.

Newly globalised crab supply chains related to the opening-up of the Chinese market have introduced heightened competition that is eroding norms of mutuality.<sup>47</sup>

Apart from the contemporary forces of market, state and modernity, even reading 16<sup>th</sup> century mythological literature from the lower Bengal delta shows how ubiquitous it is in the history of this landscape for gods, demons, animals and humans to act with self-interest motivated by ego and jealousy. Take for example the *Ray Mangal*, a 16<sup>th</sup> century text, a precursor the *Bonbibbi Joburnama*, which recounts a war against two sovereigns: Gazi and Dakshin Ray. Their armies comprise of tigers, crocodiles, sharks, bees, wasps, and hornets' swarms.<sup>48</sup> Territorial transgressions, and the smallest gestures of disrespect, lead to destruction and the unthinking slaughter of others. As sovereigns of the forests and rivers these individuals display large egos and are mired in envy, anxiety, and ambition. When one's domains are encroached upon, there is huge a price to pay. When a merchant attempting to make a ship chopped off a tree that the tiger-demon Dakshin Ray was particularly fond of, as a form of revenge Ray sets his tigers to slay all the merchants' brothers except one. From the youngest whom he spares, he demands the sacrifice of his only son in exchange for reviving his brothers.<sup>49</sup> In such cases and innumerable others, men and women are constantly killed, devoured by tigers, crocodiles, and then brought back to life. Humans, animals, gods, goddesses shape-shift and these texts reveal the blurring of any categories between the natural, supernatural, human and animal.

Instead of delving into debates around the real and the fictive, or the *kalpanik* and *aitibasik*, if we consider myth as Levi Strauss did, that is, as a means to conduct life then it is these texts and the mythology of this region that is crucial in shaping ethical life, human and nonhuman relations, as are the 'rules of the jungle'. Marisol de La Cadena makes a similar point in relation to the different terms used in Quechua for history, or a story, and an event that took place which anthropologists all gloss over and subsume as myths<sup>50</sup>. Events that took place in the forest and the recurrent tropes from these mythologies such as the themes of need, greed, desire, anger, envy and respect continue to animate daily conversation and behaviour in the Sundarbans.

Embedded and influenced by the emotion of fear and the possibilities of creating new forms of co-living in what are dangerous forests, these stories appear in village *pujos*, entertainment, ordinary dreams, and everyday thought and actions. However, such examples—from contemporary ritual practice in the village to mythological stories from several centuries ago—also serve as a warning for the proliferation of interests toward an attunement to the nonhuman as the sole basis of a form of conviviality or nonviolence. Alongside an 'ethos of egalitarianism',<sup>51</sup> forms of care towards the forest commons, taboos protecting the indiscriminate killing of tigers, and relations of social etiquette in the village, there also exist restrictions on the movement of women,

emotions of jealousy, anger and ego-injuries where the slightest disrespect is frowned upon and can lead to an all-out war.

In other parts of contemporary India, several non-dualist ontologies have the capacity for violence and exclusion. A cursory glance at the Indian state, national politics and the economy shows the pervasive influence of the “non-human” and the religious<sup>52</sup> over all so-called “secular” India.<sup>53</sup> It is well known that particular landscapes in South Asia are given divine associations, a phenomenon referred to by some as “sacred geography”<sup>54</sup> or “geopiety.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, *adivasi* or indigenous communities living in close proximity to forests and rivers are said to have a “moral ecology,”<sup>56</sup> or an “environmental personhood,”<sup>57</sup> and often ‘indigenous’ communities—because of their indigeneity—are incarcerated into a category of being ‘tree-hugging’ and nature-loving—which ignores their material and social aspirations and valorises their poverty and being ‘environmentally friendly’. A phenomenon which Alpa Shah aptly refers to as a form of ‘eco-incarceration’<sup>58</sup>

Similarly, Mukul Sharma describes an analogous phenomena where new forms of caste discrimination or ‘new casteism’ often rests on ‘neo-naturalism’, “where nature is used and abused to provide a body of knowledge and bonds, location and landscapes for naturalizing social identities and relationship in a new political and economic environment.”<sup>59</sup> Arguments that conceive of the global ecological crisis as a product of ‘Western’ technological and material development tend to extoll Indianism and the sacred ecology of Hinduism as a part of the solution, unrealizing how deeply embedded such thought and practice is in conservative Brahmanism and ‘naturalizing’ caste hierarchies.

Several practices within Hinduism might come under the rubric of animism. Take for example, the worship of rivers, mountains and the certain animals such as the cow. The cow in India is referred to as *gau mata* or the cow-as-mother and is worshiped and protected by an ever expanding group of cow protectors or *gau rakshaks*. The Manusmriti, the basic law-book of Hinduism considers anyone who kills an animal to be a murderer. All involved in the act from slaughter to butcher and the cook are considered murderers, liable to ‘nature’s’ punishment. Eating beef in India is considered a crime for which several have been lynched in the name of cow-protection. It is commonplace in Indian newspapers to come across headlines such as the following: “Dalit Family Stripped, Beaten As ‘Gau Raksha’ Vigilantism Continues.”<sup>60</sup> Certain pan-regional rivers such as the Brahmaputra are undergoing the process of being co-opted as Hindu rivers which allows certain contested territories to be subsumed into jingoistic myth making. Some forms of animism in South Asia are akin to ‘eco-casteism’ which upholds upper-caste, Brahmanical and



majoritarian views that as Sharma argues are based on exclusion and inferiorization of Dalits and lower castes”<sup>61</sup>

India is an excellent example for how recent years have seen a rise in an authoritarian nationalist mythology whereby the current form of nationalism<sup>62</sup> in India is expressed through resurrecting selective myths by overriding all the other diverse and local alternative myths that people live by. What is clear, from the current political situation in India, is that mythology has never gone away. This is not to say that mythology and the animism within it isn’t both changing and being contested.<sup>63</sup> When Isabelle Stengers calls for the reclaiming of animism, in the context of India she is also calling for the reclaiming of an ontology of violence, exclusion, caste and religious-based discrimination. Those hoping to ‘reclaim animism’ ought not to forget that some of the most violent and exclusionary practices in India emerge from what are indeed animistic ontologies. The ‘sacred geography’ of India (Ecke 2011) with its rivers, mountains, monkeys, and cows that are deified and worshipped have been and continue to be a source of political violence. From the subtle means through which ‘rules’ control women to how Brahminism upholds caste hierarchies in South Asia that are based on long-standing forms of discrimination, I have attempted to show how nonhuman governance is both benevolent and violent.

### **Ontologies of ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest’:**

The question of how people perceive their relationship to their surroundings is at the heart of human and nonhuman relations. The study of the nature of being itself (Greek *ontos*), including theories about how things come into being and how they are related to one another, is known as ontology. Twenty-first century anthropology has seen an ‘ontological turn’ or ‘turns’, or more broadly, the emergence of anthropologies of ontology. Increasingly, a variety of anthropological discourses invoking the concept of ontology have come into dialogue, and this is especially so in the analysis of dualism and animism. To put it bluntly, and there are indeed exceptions to this, it is often assumed that animistic ontologies are primarily found in ‘indigenous’ life-worlds and that the West is defined by Cartesian dualisms.

This section is interested in complicating this stark separation whereby the Christian West is emblemized for its dualism, and ‘the rest of the world,’ especially indigenous cosmologies, extolled for its animism<sup>64</sup>. <sup>65</sup>By and large scholarship in what might broadly be defined as the ‘ontological turn’, or ‘polysystem thinking’<sup>66</sup> and debates preceding it,<sup>67</sup> have argued that the dichotomized view of Western (Christian) categories of the modern, that separate out human and non-human; the religious from the so called secular; culture from nature and the agency of humans

from that of Gods<sup>68</sup> obscures the ways in which people in several different non-Christian parts of the world understand their place vis-à-vis their surroundings.<sup>69</sup>

Scholarship from research conducted among various indigenous communities in Latin America has been generative in buttressing this line of thought whereby ‘perspectivism’ and ‘multinaturalism’ are put forth by scholars to reveal a different way of seeing and being in the world. In deploying these terms scholars such as Viveiros de Castro,<sup>70</sup> Descola,<sup>71</sup> Escobar,<sup>72</sup> Kohn presuppose an ontological alterity among the people they work with. Kohn argues that paying attention to our relations beyond the human, “especially that part of the world beyond the human that is alive, forces us to make ontological claims—claims, that is, about the nature of reality”.<sup>73</sup> With regard to the scholarship of Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Kohn writes that “their work has gained traction in anthropology because of the ways it renders ontology plural without turning it into culture: different worlds instead of different worldviews.”<sup>74</sup> Marisol de la Cadena<sup>75</sup> for example, drawing on her research in the Andes, argues that people who live in the mountains consider these mountains to be sentient beings. In order to take their relationship to their surrounding landscape seriously, de la Cadena argues that one has to abandon “modern” ways of thinking and being in the world and instead urges us to acknowledge a different ontological reality. De la Cadena engages with the Quechua people’s political struggles in ways that prompts us to question Western modernity’s dominant nature and human dualism.

However, a deeper look at the repertoires of the West—across centuries—reveal that in fact there are many ways of thinking, conceptualizing and being within Western traditions that do not uphold these separations. It is not only the Amazon, the Andes, or the Sundarbans (or all of South Asia as I’ve tried to show) that reject dualism but in fact several examples from ‘the West’ reveal a variety of framing devices, ontologies and ‘lifeworlds’ that bely this stark distinction. The first of three examples from ‘Western’ repertoires of thought that move beyond mere dualism is the Medieval European ‘Book of Beasts’ or the ‘Bestiary’ that took shape over several centuries. Literary theorist Susan Crane in her analysis of the Bestiary says that on first glance, “the Bestiaries are head-spinningly heterogenous, swarming with disparate, incompatible observations on nonhuman animals.”<sup>76</sup> However, on closer observation she reveals three disparate framing devices alongside one another. These framing devices or ontologies are unexpectedly not just restricted to dualism but include analogism and animism and in this sense “articulate three ‘realities’, three ‘lifeworlds’, not a coordinated, hybridised theory of being”<sup>77</sup> Aspects of the book fit within Christian principles that in its secularised modern version are seen as ‘nature’ (out there, separate from us) versus ‘culture’ (in here, unique to us). In addition to this dualistic split, however, the book is also organized along the lines of “analogism, drawn from classical and medieval natural

science, and animism, drawn from classical animal lore and mythology.”<sup>78</sup> Analogism is a different “ancient system of being that webs all creatures, including humans, together in one sociocosmic order... analogism reads creation horizontally. Bodies interact.”<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the Bestiary has several examples of what might be defined as animism whereby “mindedness, subjectivity, and agency characterise living creatures; species are imagined as social groups, and cross species social interactions are celebrated. In contrast to dualism’s split between human cognition and animal lack, animism draws different forms of life into cognitive relationship”.<sup>80</sup> Several examples abound where elephants have “a lively intelligence and memory” or “the merciful nature of lions” is witnessed in how they spare men lying on the ground, attack men rather than women and only kill children if they are exceptionally hungry.<sup>81</sup> The lions in the Bestiary have their own ‘rules of the jungle’: “minds touch across species lines, minds communicate, and not along predetermined, instinctual pathways. Minded animals, like humans, do act in ways said to be characteristic of their species, but they also interact situationally, individually, and with discrimination”.<sup>82</sup>

The point here is that a text like the Bestiary, that emerges from Medieval Europe and has been thought to be organized around a Christian separation of nature and culture, has on a deeper analysis, a lot in common with the relationality found in Amazonian or Amerindian animism as well as the ‘rules of the jungle’ and Bengali literary texts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards such as the *Bonbibbi Joburnama* and the *Ray Mangal*. The Bestiary’s heterogenous contents prod us, in the words of Susan Crane, “to accept this heterogeneity’s intellectual challenge” for our current ontological moment.<sup>83</sup>

The second example is Romanticism and here I draw on James McKusick’s book *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*<sup>84</sup> to make connections between Romantic poets and ecological consciousness. McKusick takes us through the poetry of English and American romantic poets from Coleridge, Wordsworth, William Blake, Mary Shelley to Emerson and Thoreau to elucidate their role “in creating a new, holistic way of perceiving the natural world.” This Western tradition of writing and representing the world is a far cry from Christian dualism. English, American and German romanticism, including the works of Novalis and Aldo Leopold in addition to Emerson and Thoreau had ways of depicting, dwelling and animating what surrounds them, and taken together all inaugurated a radically new conception of humankind’s relationship to the natural world.<sup>85</sup> McKusick writes, “The most essential insights of ecological thought—namely, the adaption of species to their habitats, the interrelatedness of all life forms, and the potentially catastrophic effects of human intervention in natural systems—are first expressed by the English Romantic poets, and the more explicitly developed by American nature writes of the later nineteenth century.”<sup>86</sup>

In fact, McKusick proposes that the predecessors of environmental scholars such as William Cronon, who put forth critiques of the ideas of wilderness found in spectacular national parks, were indeed English romantic poets. “The evocation of beauty in commonplace objects is one of the most familiar hallmarks of the new poetic style pioneered by Wordsworth and Coleridge.”<sup>87</sup> For example, in the poem “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”, Coleridge evokes a sense of wonder in the restricted surroundings of his neighbour’s garden. He writes, “No plot so narrow, be but Nature there.” Thoreau and Emerson similarly advocated the notion that one can discover beauty in commonplace objects, in the ordinary and everyday aspects of ‘nature’ not just in spectacular sceneries on a grand scale. Cronon in his famous essay *‘The Trouble with Wilderness’* writes, “we need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place”<sup>88</sup> Cronon’s essay appeared two centuries after the Romantic poets, and these historical genealogies and connections ought not to be erased.

Several have caricatured the Romantic legacy, with the word ‘romantic’ oddly thought of as a derogatory way of perceiving the world, with more ‘modern’ ways of understanding the concept of ‘nature’ and the complex interrelations between people and the places where they live, work and play. Yet, as McKusick points out, “such a one-sided caricature of the ‘romantic legacy’ entails a distinct loss of our intellectual and cultural heritage. The Romantic tradition offers a far more rich and varied set of responses to the natural world than is dreamed of in the conventional history of ideas.” As we re-visit animism, perhaps Coleridge might be re-visited as a “cosmic ecologist” as well. The Romantic legacy is very close to postmodern environmental theory and what one might perceive as several ‘modern’ ideas about contemporary ecological consciousness. Romanticism may authentically be termed “ecological,” for it views “the earth as a dwelling-place for all living things,” a point that has also been made in a myriad ways by Timothy Morton.

My third example reveals how Europe has consistently had humans interact with porous and negotiated boundaries with other species, materialities and spirits. Specifically, this can be found in the plural history of France written by Graham Robb in his book *The Discovery of France*<sup>89</sup> which traces the histories of several parts of rural France including various local fairies, saints, demons and oracles that—despite the Catholic Church’s best efforts—formed a part of the landscape and people’s daily lives. For example, for towns in the Pyrenees, penis shaped stones were attended by rituals around storytelling, seasonal celebrations, sex and the defiance of the authorities. Later, by stubbornly demarcating common ground, saints and stones helped safeguard gleaning and grazing rights and acted as a link between communities. These beings were more than myths: “[t]he social and political development of France owes a great deal to the supernatural acts

of inanimate objects.”<sup>90</sup> Contemporary Sundarbans are no more or less exotic than modern day France, or in other words France can be equally ‘magicalized’ as the Sundarbans. Indeed, ‘cosmic-polities’ are part of the West’s inheritance as well.

From questions of ontology in Medieval European Books to Romantic Poetry and the living archive of pagan rituals in France, I return once again to South Asia. Let us return to the convergence between the context of the Sundarbans and that of the Mishmi community described by Aiyadurai in *‘Tigers Are Our Brothers.’* In both contexts, that of the Mishmi alongside those who ‘do the jungle,’ several animated, nonhuman agents guide both resource use and social relationships through a set the rules (*niyams*) and prohibitions. The source of these rules is neither state institutions nor legal jurisprudence. Nonhuman “cosmic polities” from deities, demons and spirits play a crucial part in governing everyday life. In the Sundarbans, these rules and taboos are not associated with a particular ‘indigenous tribe’ or even one caste group, instead they are more akin to livelihood rules, and are followed only by those who undertake a particular vocation in the forest. The ‘rules of the jungle’ are followed by SC communities such as *Poundra Khoitras* and *Namasudras*, along with ‘traditional’ fishermen caste groups such as *Raj Bongshis*, *Jbeley Kaibartas*, Scheduled Tribe households such as *Mundas*, *Bhumij* and *Santhal* as well as Muslims who live in the region. They are not based on an ontological alterity tied to ‘indigeneity.’

In the context of South Asia, this is a key departure from Amerindian and Amazonian scholarship that pre-supposes an ontological alterity with regard to non-dualistic relations between humans and nonhuman. By creating some form of radical ontological alterity, I am cautious of creating a ‘Dalit naturalism’ that can often serve as caste-essentialism or what Sharma terms as a form of ‘eco-casteism’.<sup>91</sup> “Cosmic-polities” such as Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray are one example among thousands in the landscape of South Asia. For residents of the Sundarbans, the jungle is imbued with not just sentient but also moral, social and political beings, and there was simply no question of separating the natural from the supernatural, the scientific from the mythological, the social from the political. If ‘*adivasis* and Dalits have a separate ontology of animism, in the context of South Asia so do upper caste Brahmins, the Hindu Right and the proponents of several Hindu scriptures— at once embedded in a ‘sacred landscape’ that both protects rivers, mountains and animals while also entrenching hierarchies, forms of exclusion and justifies violence again tribals, Dalits and Muslims.

By way of ending, perhaps one can think of anthropological writing as a way of creating new possibilities, a practice that can propose a bricolage of realities and ontologies, some benevolent and some violent. Stuart McLean’s book, *Fictionalizing Anthropology* provides one of the most creative means of juxtaposing diverse folkloric, historical, literary, and ethnographic accounts

– primarily from the North Atlantic to persuade us that storytelling is a mode of ‘ontological poesis,’<sup>92</sup> it does not simply reflect – or even reflect on – aspects of the world as given; it participates in the very making of worlds. In the same way, he suggests, the stories anthropologists tell and the comparisons they make may be ontologically generative, part of the becoming of new possibilities for human and other-than-human being.

## **Conclusion:**

This essay has been an attempt to reveal the fault lines and contradiction within nonhuman forms of governance in South Asia. Based on fieldwork conducted in the Sundarbans forests of India among those who ‘do the jungle,’ I show how a set of non-state rules (*niyams*) guide both social relations and resource use. The source of these rules are ‘cosmic polities’—deities and demons—who are responsible for both the preservation and productivity of life *and* can do harm and cause death.. The forest deity Bonbibi and the tiger-demon Dakhin Rai with their accompanying ‘rules of the jungle’ “are dominant figures in what we habitually call ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ in all the societies so constituted.” While this essay proposes to take seriously “cosmic polities” as forms of governance, acknowledging the power of more-than-human sovereigns need not necessarily imply a more convivial relationship between humans and nonhumans.

Through the Sundarbans case, where a diverse caste, tribe and religious community follow the ‘rules of the jungle,’ my essay is also an attempt to move away from proposing any ontological alterity vis-à-vis their relationship to their surroundings. Such pigeon-holing, in the context of South Asia, has the potential to further incarcerate certain communities and their identities with that of a landscape. Dalit naturalism can be associated with a kind of ‘eco-castiesm’ and caste-essentialism, much like a form of ‘eco-incarceration’ of *adivasis*. Instead, this relationship between people and their landscapes is complex and conflict-ridden and can range from being emancipatory and oppressive. Nonhuman governance is not specific to a caste, tribe, religion or an ‘indigenous’ group but in the context of India is pervasive across the nation and indeed, has become a rather terrifying part of the Indian state and the politics of exclusion by the Hindu Right.

Critiques of ‘the West’ and its ‘nature’ versus ‘culture’ dualism on the one hand, and the valorisation of ontologically distinct animistic life-worlds on the other hand, is problematic not only because it ignores ‘animism’ within several ‘Western’ repertoires of thought and action but also glosses over the hierarchy and forms of predation within animistic ontologies in South Asia and elsewhere. Current ecological consciousness has prodded many to reject Western dualism and instead embrace animism. The South Asian context provides an important cautionary tale to this

blind embrace of animism, as the sole saviour of our ecological crisis, and my essay reveals a spectrum of violence—from the subtle restrictions that the ‘rules of the jungle’ impose on women to the outright domination of Brahminical, Hindu ideologies that ‘naturalize’ caste and believe in protecting the sacred cow at the cost of human lives. While “cosmic polities” undeniably govern life, I show how nonhuman forms of governance are capable of exclusion, discrimination and outright violence.

Furthermore, this essay has tried to blur the boundaries of what is currently a sharp separation between an outright rejection of Western genealogies of thought on the one hand and the valorisation of animism on the other by showing deeply animistic traditions in the repertoires of Western thought through three examples. What has been conceived of being structured around Christian dualism—the alleged root cause of our ecological crisis—is but one genealogy of the traditions of thought of the ‘West’. The first is the Medieval European ‘Book of Beasts’ in which dualism, analogism and animism are all simultaneous framing devices. The Bestiary—which distributes cognition, affect and virtue across species lines—ought to be conceived of as one example among many others that can allow us to see the heterogeneity in our own ontological moment.<sup>93</sup> Secondly this essay, dwells on the similarities and inspiration that contemporary ecological consciousness might take from Romantic poets, “since their poetry consistently expresses a deep and abiding interest in the Earth as a dwelling-place for all living things...and foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its holistic conception of the Earth as a household, a dwelling-place for an interdependent biological community”.<sup>94</sup> Lastly, I cite the example of modern day France where landscape acts as a living <sup>95</sup>archive of a Pagan past, where remnants of various saints, oracles, fairies and pagan rituals reveal how ‘cosmic polities’ are present in ‘the West’ alongside ‘the rest of the world’ with these stark separations being too water-tight and unhelpful in our understanding of the current ecological crisis. Ultimately, through the Sundarbans and comparisons across South Asia and ‘the West’, this essay has attempted to propose that we are living within a bricolage of realities and ontologies. Taking its cue from art and literature as much as from the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ sciences, as Stewart McClean has argued, the work of anthropology might be to understand itself less as the study of an objectified humanity than as the open-ended, performative exploration of alternative potentialities of collective existence—of new ways of being human and other than human, in what is then ultimately a landscape of possibilities.

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- <sup>1</sup> Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism - Journal #36 July 2012 - e-Flux.”
  - <sup>2</sup> Viveiros de Castro and Skafish, *Cannibal Metaphysics*.
  - <sup>3</sup> Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.
  - <sup>4</sup> <https://thewire.in/politics/dalit-family-stripped-beaten-as-gau-raksha-vigilantism-continues>
  - <sup>5</sup> McKusick, “Green Writing : Romanticism and Ecology.”
  - <sup>6</sup> Robb, *The Discovery of France*.
  - <sup>7</sup> Sharma, *Caste and Nature : Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*.
  - <sup>8</sup> *The Spoils of Partition : Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, 111.
  - <sup>9</sup> Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition : Bengal and India, 1947-1967*.
  - <sup>10</sup> Barman, “From Pods to Poundra.”
  - <sup>11</sup> Barman, 128–30.
  - <sup>12</sup> Jalais, *Forest of Tigers : People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*.
  - <sup>13</sup> Sarkar, *The Sundarbans : Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals*.
  - <sup>14</sup> Schmalz and Gottschalk, *Engaging South Asian Religions : Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*.
  - <sup>15</sup> Das, “The Bonbibi Cult of Sundarbans: Expressions and Expectations in the Performances of Everyday Life.”
  - <sup>16</sup> Sahlins, “The Original Political Society,” 91.
  - <sup>17</sup> Sahlins focuses on a number of “egalitarian” societies around the world including the Chewong, the Central Inuit, Highland New Guineans, Australian Aboriginals, and native Amazonians among others.
  - <sup>18</sup> Aiyadurai, “Tigers Are Our Brothers : Anthropology of Wildlife Conservation in Northeast India,” 59.
  - <sup>19</sup> Aiyadurai, 52.
  - <sup>20</sup> Aiyadurai, 52.
  - <sup>21</sup> Mauss, *The Gift : The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 79.
  - <sup>22</sup> Hocart, *Kings and Councillors : An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society*, 3.
  - <sup>23</sup> Hocart, 92.
  - <sup>24</sup> Hocart, 299.
  - <sup>25</sup> Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment*.
  - <sup>26</sup> Parry, “Mauss, Dumont and the Distinction between Status and Power.”
  - <sup>27</sup> Shah, *In the Shadows of the State : Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India*.
  - <sup>28</sup> Appadurai and Breckenridge, “The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honour and Redistribution.”
  - <sup>29</sup> Gold and Gujar, “Of Gods, Trees and Boundaries: Divine Conservation in Rajasthan.”
  - <sup>30</sup> Bird David, “‘Animism’ Revisited.”
  - <sup>31</sup> Arumugam, “‘The Old Gods Are Losing Power!’: Theologies of Power and Rituals of Productivity in a Tamil Nadu Village.”
  - <sup>32</sup> Gagné, *Caring for Glaciers*.
  - <sup>33</sup> Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies : Interspecies Relatedness in India’s Central Himalayas*.
  - <sup>34</sup> Bear, *Navigating Austerity : Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*.
  - <sup>35</sup> Singh, *Poverty and the Quest for Life : Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India*.
  - <sup>36</sup> Singh, 55.
  - <sup>37</sup> Taneja, *Jinnealogy : Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*.
  - <sup>38</sup> Sharma, *Caste and Nature : Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*, 5.
  - <sup>39</sup> Sharma, 5.
  - <sup>40</sup> Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*.
  - <sup>41</sup> Bird David, “‘Animism’ Revisited.”
  - <sup>42</sup> Fernando, “Uncanny Ecologies: More-than-Natural, More-than-Human, More-Than-Secular,” 18.
  - <sup>43</sup> Fernando, 19.
  - <sup>44</sup> Gadgil and Vartak, “The Sacred Groves of Western Ghats in India.”
  - <sup>45</sup> Leach, “Earth Mother Myths and Other Ecofeminist Fables: How a Strategic Notion Rose and Fell.”
  - <sup>46</sup> She co-habited with an older married (separated) man who she was not married to.
  - <sup>47</sup> Mehtta, “Crab Antics: The Moral and Political Economy of Greed Accusations in the Submerging Sundarbans Delta of India.”



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- 48 Stewart, *Witness to Marvels : Sufism and Literary Imagination*, 139.
- 49 Stewart, 141.
- 50 de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*.
- 51 Jalais, *Forest of Tigers : People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*.
- 52 Madan, "The Case of India"; Nandy, *Time Warps : Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*; Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation : Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*; Hansen, *The Saffron Wave : Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*; Bear, *Navigating Austerity : Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*.
- 53 The purpose here is not to enter into a debate on secularism and religion in India but to simply state that Sundarbans residents' do not have an ontology that is unique and distinct from that of any other South Asian.
- 54 Eck, *India : A Sacred Geography*.
- 55 Madhu, "Nature as Feminine: Ancient Vision of Geopiet and Goddess Ecology."
- 56 Apfell-Marglin and Parajuli, "'Sacred Grove' and Ecology: Ritual and Science," 311.
- 57 Campbell, *Living Between Juniper and Palm*.
- 58 Shah, *In the Shadows of the State : Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India*.
- 59 Sharma, *Caste and Nature : Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*, xviii.
- 60 <https://thewire.in/politics/dalit-family-stripped-beaten-as-gau-raksha-vigilantism-continues>
- 61 Sharma, xxvii.
- 62 Nandy, *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*.
- 63 Miles-Watson and Asimos, *The Bloomsbury Reader in the Study of Myth*.
- 64 Stacey, "Toying with Animism: How Learning to Play Might Help Us Get Serious About the Environment."
- 66 Stewart, *Witness to Marvels : Sufism and Literary Imagination*.
- 67 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.
- 68 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Keane, *Christian Moderns : Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*; Veer, *Imperial Encounters : Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*.
- 69 Graeber, "Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying 'Reality.'"
- 70 Viveiros de Castro and Skafish, *Cannibal Metaphysics*.
- 71 Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.
- 72 Escobar, *Territories of Difference : Place, Movements, Life, Redes*; Escobar, "Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South."
- 73 Kohn, *How Forests Think : Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, 9.
- 74 Kohn, 10.
- 75 de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*.
- 76 Crane, "An Ontological Turn for the Medieval Books of Beasts: Environmental Theory from Premodern to Postmodern," 112.
- 77 Crane, 122.
- 78 Crane, 115.
- 79 Crane, 116.
- 80 Crane, 118.
- 81 Crane, 118.
- 82 Crane, 118.
- 83 Crane, 119.
- 84 McKusick, "Green Writing : Romanticism and Ecology."
- 85 Buell, "The Environmental Imagination : Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture"; Bate, "Romantic Ecology : Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition"; McKusick, "Green Writing : Romanticism and Ecology."
- 86 McKusick, 28.
- 87 McKusick, 10.
- 88 McKusick, 10.
- 89 Robb, *The Discovery of France*.
- 90 Robb, 127.
- 91 Sharma, *Caste and Nature : Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*.

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<sup>92</sup> McLean, *Fictionalizing Anthropology: Encounters and Fabulations at the Edges of the Human*.

<sup>93</sup> Crane, "An Ontological Turn for the Medieval Books of Beasts: Environmental Theory from Premodern to Postmodern," 122.

<sup>94</sup> McKusick, "Green Writing : Romanticism and Ecology," 29.

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Dear Editors-in-Chief at CSSAAME,

Many thanks for giving me the chance to revise my manuscript. I do apologize for my slight delay in resubmitting the manuscript and am extremely grateful for your patience.

I found each of the reviewers' recommendations as well as comments from the editors of the Special Issue very helpful in strengthening my argument and have taken each suggestion on board and have made the revisions and additions requested.

In what follows this letter, I have detailed every change I have made and the comment which prompted it. All the text of the reviewers' comments have been reproduced in these tables on the left, without omission, so that I can be as clear as possible as to how and where I have taken their suggestions on board which I have detailed on the righthand side column with page numbers.

I hope that you find that my manuscript has improved and that you enjoy reading it. I really enjoyed re-working it and am thrilled that the reviewers think that I have 'refreshingly original' contribution to make and I do hope that you find my manuscript improved both conceptually and structural.

My sincere thanks to you and the reviewers for the hard work you have put into making my manuscript better.

I look forward to working with you in the future.

Very best,  
 Megnaa Mehtta

**Table of Revisions:**

Suggested Revisions	Incorporation of revisions with page numbers
<p><b>Overall suggestions and conceptual contributions.</b>                      Both reviewers have asked to restructure the paper in light of my conceptual contributions, putting the main points ahead with greater clarity.</p> <p>“Conceptual clarification and purpose of the paper”(R1)</p> <p>“The readers have no sense of the argument or the framing of the paper till page 7 where the crux of the argument has been embedded” (R2)</p>	<p>I really appreciate the reviewers for pushing me towards improving my conceptual contributions which I have done so in the revised version of my manuscript. In order to bring out my main arguments, I have done a thorough restructuring of the article and its sections. The changed structure of the essay weaves the conceptual arguments with the specific ethnographic evidence with better transitions, richer contextualization and sharper conceptual work as requested.</p>

<p>“For the author to bring out their critical departures from the existing body of literature, the article needs some refocusing and structure (R2)</p>	<p>R1 &amp; R2 believe that clarifying my conceptual contribution will be possible by restructuring of the paper and by putting forth the main contributions upfront. I have taken this suggestion on board and have begun the essay without an ethnographic vignette but instead by stating the main arguments of the essay and how my contributions depart from the current literature in the field. Pg 1-3 are an overview of my sharpened contributions in light of the current debates on the nonhuman making from the point of view of South Asia.</p> <p>Similarly, the conclusion on Pg 21 &amp; 22 seeks to summarize the contributions once again.</p> <p>-I reveal how a South Asian perspective on the nonhuman cautions us not to embrace animism or extoll it blindly, for strands of South Asian animism can be exclusionary, violent and based on a politics of hate.</p> <p>- I also emphasize that the binary between Western dualism and ‘indigenous ontologies’ is overly simplistic by highlighting examples in Western repertoires of thought and action that represent current day ecological consciousness.</p> <p>-Through evidence from the diversity of caste and religious groups of the Sundarbans, I caution against an ontological alterity that can incarcerate castes and tribes, leading to a form of essentialization.</p>
<p><b>Contextualizing the Sundarbans &amp; the regional literature:</b></p> <p>1)“A claim is made about there being 5 million "ecological and political refugees." Where has that number appeared from? Who are the ecological refugees? Where are they from?” (R1)</p> <p>2)“We get chunks of history about the faqeers and pirs of the Sundarbans but no real engagement with that history. Why are we made to read it if it is not to build on it?” (R1)</p> <p>3)“There is also no real engagement with the scholars who have already written on the "laws/rules of the forest" such as Tushar Neogi, Sutapa Chatterji Sarkar, and Anu Jalais”</p>	<p>1)This is an important clarification that R1 asked for. I have taken this suggestion on board and have provided a much richer migration history of the Sundarbans, describing in detail the eclectic caste backgrounds and religious backgrounds of the groups of refugees that came to settle in the Sundarbans. This becomes a key point in the essay itself, where Sundarbans residents do not belong to one caste/ tribe/ ‘indigenous’ group but are from a multiplicity of backgrounds because of the Partition of India and the creation of Bangladesh. Pg 4-5 are focused on contextualizing Sundarbans resident’s caste, class and tribe sociology.</p> <p>2)I agree with R1 and have made requisite revisions. As the current conceptual contribution stands, the history of <i>pirs</i> and <i>faqirs</i> though important is not crucial to the argument that I am making in the essay and so I have deleted this section in order to focus on providing a context to only those aspects of the Sundarbans that are relevant to the current argument.</p> <p>3) The revised manuscript engages with Annu Jalai, Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, Neogi along with several other scholars of the region. As pg 6</p>

	<p>makes clear, the arguments I make build on their work but have a different purpose than to recount the mythology of the region. Instead, I am interested in providing a cautionary tale that essentializes a community and its relationship with nature as well as scholarship that extols animism in the context of India, which I reveal to have violent and exclusionary tendencies. In this case, Mukul Sharma’s work is much more relevant and has been engaged with in depth.</p>
<p align="center"><b>“Cosmic Polities”/ Niyams or Rules</b></p> <p>“I would encourage the author to focus on making explicit how these three concepts connect in the article and tie in their rich ethnography with these concepts” (R2)</p> <p>“Niyam: Also, I had a question: are "niyam" and governance the same or interchangeable ideas? Is niyam not also ritual and not just regulation? If we were to translate niyam as custom rather law or regulation, where would the argument stand? I would encourage the author to spend a little time unpacking the layered translation that would be necessary to get from jungler niyam to nonhuman governance as we understand it.” (R2)</p> <p>“What is "nonhuman governance"? the author argues that along with Dakshin Ray Bonbibi is a "cosmo-polity," but we are not told what is meant by this” (R1)</p> <p>“I felt unpacking the impossibility of translating niyam to governance might actually allow the author to define and vernacularize cosmo-politics into this particular landscape, rather than parachuting in this conceptual framework”. (R2)</p> <p>“I am pushing the author here to nuance their arguments, especially because I enjoyed the conceptual density of what I see as cognate ideas of niyam, nonhuman governance, and cosmo-politics, and I think unpacking this in their theoretical and ethnographic detail would make for a rich and important intervention.” (R2)</p>	<p>I appreciate R 1&amp; 2’s suggestion to address, in more depth, the interconnections between my concepts. This has now been explicitly done with a section on ‘Cosmic Polities’ (pg6) and thinking of rules as indeed custom and ritual. I explore what the source of these nonstate rules are, where they emerge from and why they are upheld and broken. Here I argue the source of these rules are “cosmic polities” -demons, deities and spirits and meta-persons- that have power over life – are life-giving and death dealing.</p> <p>Pg 10-12 explicitly explains what nonhuman governance through ‘cosmic polities’ are by drawing on a range of scholarship across India including the recent ethnography written by Ambika Aiyudurai.</p> <p>I a delighted that R2 thinks that this is a section that makes rich and important interventions. Pg 6-12 in the revised manuscript nuances the arguments on <i>niyams</i> and ‘cosmic polities’ and makes better interconnections between the concept of animism as well as its possibilities of representing ecological consciousness but also forms of violence.</p>
<p><b>Violence and exclusion within Nonhuman governance/ animism:</b></p>	<p>I also make the interconnections to show how while governance of the nonhuman is undeniable in South Asia it is crucial not to think of this is as necessarily convivial, ecologically beneficial and nonviolent. Several examples from India reveal that animism can also lead to gender restrictions, essentialise caste hierarchies, incarcerate Dalits and <i>adivasis</i> in their ‘natural’ identities vis-à-vis</p>



	<p>certain landscapes. ‘Traditional’ Hindu texts can often be used to justify certain forms of violence. This is how the concept of nonhuman governance through <i>niyams</i> and cosmic polities also relates to the violence inherent in South Asian animism. Such a perspective from South Asia is currently lacking in the scholarship on the nonhuman.</p>
<p><b>Literature engagement:</b></p> <p>1) Could use “scholarship on temple/sacral economies and polities, which disabused any ideas of separation between the spiritual cosmological versus political/economic, which I think the author is also attempting to do. For the earlier scholarship I am thinking here of Appadurai, Breckenridge.” (R2)</p> <p>2) Reviewer suggests one section to be “reworked by carefully parsing through the South Asian material and literature, rather than relying solely on non-South Asian ethnographic material.” (R2)</p>	<p>1) R2 is correct in pointing out that I am indeed attempting to show in the essay the ways in which the sacral/political and economic collapse. I appreciate the reviewers’ suggestions and have incorporated several authors from South Asia who use concepts of sacral economies/ polities including Appadurai and Breckenridge. Please see Pg 11.</p> <p>2) I have taken this suggestion on board and the revised manuscript engages in depth with material from South Asia – including but not limited to the recent ethnography of Ambika Aiyudurai titled <i>Tigers are our Brothers</i> (2021) as well as Mukul Sharma’s book on <i>Caste and Nature</i> (2017)</p>
<p><b>Minor clarifications / typos:</b></p> <p>I have two minor cautionary notes: (a) I would urge the author to carefully deploy the term <i>mythological memory</i>, especially in the Indian context given the multiple slippages and connotations myth, memory and history has in the subcontinent post 1992. (b) I was not entirely convinced about the author’s reading of Jalais’s work. (R2)</p>	<p>Agreed. I have made the necessary clarifications in the deployment of myth, memory and history sought by the R2.</p> <p>I have taken out the term ‘mythological memory’ and by drawing on the work of Marisol De La Cadena and others on pg 15 and 16, I explain the importance of mythology and the way it shapes quotidian life.</p> <p>In terms of Jalais’ argument that the forest inspires an ethos of egalitarianism, I also show that alongside this the forest has and can inspire violence too. This is indeed of the main contributions of the paper that animism can be based on caste and tribe essentialism, gender restrictions and divisive politics in South Asia.</p> <p>The manuscript has not been revised for typos and grammatical errors.</p>