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The Man-Eater Sent by God: Unruly Interspecies Intimacies in India's Central Himalayas

The distinctive silhouette of the *toon* trees that guarded a small temple in Poli—a hamlet in the Kumaon region of India's central Himalayan state Uttarakhand—were a welcome sight on a cold December night of 2012.¹ Although the path to the temple was illuminated by moonlight, our group of eight carried torches. No one was sure if the man-eating leopards that had attacked and killed several women in nearby villages were dead or alive, but we were certainly not taking any chances.

After a woman had been killed by a leopard the previous October, people were terrified of leaving the safety of their homes after dark. For once, the state's response was quick.² The leopard was declared a man-eater, and Lakhpat Singh Rawat, a Garhwali hunter hailed in the vernacular and English press as a modern Jim Corbett, was brought in to destroy it. In the middle of October he shot an adult leopard that he claimed was the culprit. Yet just as people began to let their guard down, a second woman was killed by a leopard in the same area, and then another. There were rumors that Rawat had shot the wrong leopard, but it was also possible that there was a second on the loose. After ten days, Rawat shot another leopard, and the local administration declared that the region was now free of man-eaters. But shortly thereafter a fourth woman was killed and eaten: it appeared that the area was not man-eater free.

In December, a few weeks after these events, my friend Kusum asked me to join her on a trip to Poli, her maternal village, where some families were organizing a *jagar*—a god and spirit possession ceremony—in a temple dedicated to Golu *devta*, a powerful local deity. On the night of the *jagar*, Golu, speaking through the medium he had possessed, was answering people's queries about jobs and marriages when one elderly man asked him what villagers had done to deserve the terror they were enduring. "Save us from these man-eating leopards," he pleaded. "One is killed, and another follows. When will this end? What have we done to displease you?" The deity responded

1 The names of villages and people used in this article have been changed to preserve their privacy.

2 For an excellent ethnographic of the state's response to the arrival of a man-eating leopard in a small town in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, and its implications for an anthropology of the state and bureaucracy, see Nayanika Mathur, "The Reign of Terror of the Big Cat: Bureaucracy and the Mediation of Social Times in the Indian Himalaya," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, no. S1 (2014): 148–65. See also Annu Jalais, *People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2011)"

angrily. For centuries, he declared, the fields by the forest had been home to a temple, but this land had been sold to an outsider. The recent events were a consequence of people having forsaken their deities in pursuit of greed. The leopards, he warned, would keep coming until balance was restored.

On the way back from the *jagar*, I fell into step with Kusum's uncle, Mohan Joshi, a retired schoolteacher. When conversation turned to the *jagar*, he said that disregarding the deity's pronouncements would be foolish. "I'm not a superstitious man," he continued. "The government is saying that leopards attack people because the forest is being destroyed by humans and there is no food left there . . . There might be some truth [to that], but it's also true that leopards have *always* come into our villages. They come of their own choice and at the order of deities." When I asked what he meant by this he said: "Humans, animals, and deities have responsibilities towards one another. We have forgotten our responsibilities towards our gods. That's why killing one leopard after another will not do any good. They will just keep coming until we propitiate our deities . . . Leopards are also devotees [*bhakt*s]. They are fulfilling their obligations to the gods."

Mohan's reflections capture how human-wildlife conflict is shaped by the unruly nature of human and nonhuman animals inhabiting geographies that overlap and intersect and are themselves unruly. Leopards visiting villages, he reminded me, was not a new phenomenon; the animals did so "by choice," not because they were compelled to by the destruction of their "natural" habitat. His observations are confirmed by wildlife biologists, who find that leopards in India are highly adaptable in having *learned* how to live in and around human-dominated, multi-use landscapes. Several point out that leopards thought to have "strayed" into zones of human habitation are actually constant but largely invisible *residents* of these spaces.³ What is clear is that the "vibrant" and restless materiality of these animals means that they constantly transgress human imaginative placings of them in spaces of wilderness.⁴ Across India leopards are creating new habitats in unexpected spaces that are remarkably different from one another. From visiting municipal rubbish dumps on the city's edge at night to sleeping in fields

3 T. R. Shankar Raman, "Leopard Landscapes: Coexisting with Carnivores in Countryside and City," *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 1 (January 2015).

4 I borrow the term "vibrant materiality" from Jane Bennett, who makes a compelling case for the recognition of material agency. She notes that nonhuman bodies and things possess the capacity to make events happen, and that a "lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors." Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

in the middle of the day, one could argue that they act as agents whose behavior produces results that do not always conform to human expectations. They are unruly beings with impulses and desires of their own, which can work with or against their human neighbors in this world of interspecies companionship.

The people who encounter these leopards in these spaces of contact recognize the effervescent, often ungovernable, vitality that they inject into situations, creating unexpected outcomes. In 2011, I overheard a conversation between a group of men about a man-eating tigress who had been attacking villagers in Corbett National Park. One of the men had just read an interview with a forest official who said that villagers were at fault for intruding into the buffer zone and disturbing the big cats; the group was both amused and angered by the comment. One of the men laughed and said: “Wait for the day when a tiger strolls into his office. Then he will know what it’s like. I don’t need to go to the forest, I see a leopard near my house every month. These forest officials can try and control us, but how will they control these animals?” His comment was a reminder of these animals’ capacity to transform the course of life in ways that are neither desired nor anticipated by humans.

These unpredictable interspecies encounters occur in a shared landscape that is itself unruly and saturated with possibility. The absence of clear boundaries between field and forest in this region has been exacerbated over the last decade as a result of the growing abandonment of agriculture by young people who find it unprofitable and demeaning. Fields abandoned by humans are quickly reclaimed by secondary growth—mostly varieties of grasses, shrub bushes, and woody species grown by farmers in small quantities for fodder, fuelwood, and fiber. During the monsoons especially, grasses grow tall and thick, coming almost waist-high for some women. Some grass is cut for fodder, but as the human and livestock population of villages drops, much of this growth goes unchecked. Scholars working in other parts of South Asia have noted how, as fields are abandoned and villages depopulated, land once cultivated slowly reverts to wooded tracts, even as it bears the detritus of earlier habitation and cultivation. Similar processes of reclamation by “nature” are at work in the mountain villages of Uttarakhand.

This changing, ungovernable landscape creates microhabitats capable of supporting small groups of wild animals in the midst of cultivated and residential spaces. As

forests degrade and fragment, wild boar and deer move into these new habitats to be closer to the fields that they raid for sustenance. They are followed by leopards, whose work is made easier by the concentration of prey in these zones. It is here that people most often encounter these animals, in spaces once considered human domains. However, the unruliness of the landscape now makes it difficult, if it was ever possible, to separate a “human world” from a “wild world.” These intersecting multispecies geographies refuse easy boundaries, offering instead a world of uneasy and messy cohabitation.

There exists a further layer of complexity to the unruliness emerging from, and shaping, these interspecies encounters. People like Mohan Joshi, the schoolteacher who told me that leopards were also devotees of local deities, believe that humans, animals, and deities live in a usually harmonious world of mutual obligation and responsibility. However, when someone is remiss in their duties, chaos can ensue. According to this perspective, the man-eating leopards acted as they did because the gods desired it. This belief was strengthened by the perception that even the state, with all its resources, was unable to deal with the refractory leopards. People asked how three man-eaters could emerge in succession within a month. Even if only one leopard was the culprit, the fact that two had been shot in a case of mistaken identity confirmed for many that the man-eater acted with divine sanction. People thus made sense of the leopards’ unruly behavior in terms of the deep and meaningful relationships they believe animals to share with local deities. What permits such readings of animal behavior is a widespread belief that animals share certain social attributes with humans—as Philippe Descola puts it, “a hierarchy of positions, behaviors based on kinship, respect for certain norms of conduct.”⁵ As in many other social and cultural contexts, animals are perceived not as beyond the realm of the social, but as constitutive of it.

Let me return then to the question of unruliness. I have suggested that unruliness both emerges from and structures interspecies intimacies in the central Himalayas. The collective of human and nonhuman (animal, vegetal, divine) bodies is one marked by unruliness, which emerges through the ability of nonhuman actors to exert consequences by virtue of their materiality. In the blink of an eye, plants and grasses reclaim spaces that were under cultivation for decades; people would often exclaim

5 Philippe Descola, *In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 88.

at how quickly fields became overgrown with grasses, shrubs, and trees, creating a patchwork landscape of field, forest, and an intermediate between the two. Animals like leopards, but also monkeys and wild boar, likewise inject their own unpredictable agency into interspecies life. Their unruliness is manifest in their capacity to transgress human expectations and to act in ways that have unexpected consequences.

People recognize and manage such unruliness by extending a kind of personhood to animals, based in part upon an understanding that humans and animals alike are subject to the power of local deities. This understanding of animals as devotees encourages culturally meaningful forms of mediation in cases where humans' unruliness—or, in this case, the unruliness of humans who forget their obligations to the gods and sell land with a temple on it—threatens to get out of hand. It is this unruliness, with its unexpected possibilities, which allows for the flourishing of an interspecies companionship rooted in more than just violence and fear. The relationships engendered are characterized by conflict, respect, fear, admiration, and other embodied forms of intimacy. If we are to understand the complex and multiple dimensions of the interspecies companionship at the heart of human-wildlife conflict, we must first recognize and theorize the complicated promise offered by these unruly edges.⁶

6 I borrow the term from Anna Tsing's wonderful essay on mushrooms and interspecies companionate relations: Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species," *Environmental Humanities* no. 1 (2012): 141–54.

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