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Catch me if you can: Monkey capture in Delhi

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Abstract
This article is a study of Delhi's monkey-catchers, municipal contractors who trap and relocate simians. I examine their perspectives, as well as those of planners and residents. Parallel but competing dispositions vis-à-vis monkeys – fascination and repulsion, piousness and annoyance – are detailed. In so doing, the article addresses the following themes: purification and displacement, the neighbour and stranger, multi-species cohabitation, planning and modernization, and the circulation of gift and sin. Three interwoven arguments bear on studies of modernity, urban governance, and post-humanism. First, Indian cities are not becoming irreversibly bourgeois and sanitized; humans engage in varied ways with monkeys and are complicit in their presence, by ritually gifting food. The logic of the gift vies with the desire to cleanse; a supernatural current animates the modernist city. Second, studies of bureaucratic power often presume coherence and efficiency. In contrast, I illustrate official ambivalence to cleansing, as well as structural constraints and makeshift arrangements that conspire against the master plan. Third, I question post-humanist and multi-species theories that seek to transcend Western ontology. The monkey-catchers' porous taxonomy for human–animal differences affirms human primacy as much as it dissolves dichotomies.

Keywords
human–animal relations, urban cleansing, *dan*, neighbourliness, Hanuman, Old Delhi, India

Unstable creatures

Nand Lal crouched low, pointing to the monkey: 'this guy is part of Hanuman's army' (*yeh baba hanuman ka sena hain*). It was hard to imagine the animal in fatigues. It was a small thing, a baby rhesus. A couple of months old, it would have fit in one's palm. In contrast, Hanuman, the Hindu monkey God, had an

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inflated physique. In early 20th-century drawings, he was bulky but undefined. In recent years, in paintings and sculptures, he was bigger. His muscles were well-sculpted, like a weight-lifter. It reflected a fashion, made popular by Bollywood heroes, for working out in gyms. Divine figures were not immune to this trend: Hanuman had gotten a six-pack.

The baby was not so intimidating. With tufts of soft hair, and large, inquisitive eyes, it looked like something a toddler would cradle. It was confined to a cage, though, through which Nand Lal dropped orange slices. Sealed off from others, the monkey served a purpose. It was not an idol of worship, a stand in for the beyond. Nor was it a toy to cuddle, wildness stuffed and made safe (Fiskesjö, 2003). Inside the cage, the monkey served a more elementary role: as opposite and other.

The monkey became Nand Lal's ward in early 2008, through work. He was a *bandar pakadne wala*; a monkey-catcher, employed by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Nand Lal led a floating pool of contract employees. They fanned across the city, responding to the simian menace. They focused on monkey *kabilas*, groups of dominant males, followers, and children. Each troop of a dozen or so had *apna ilaka* – their own turf. This overlay the human map of the city, a grid both licit and illicit. Rail-track shanties and pop-up vendors, after all, undid the master plan.

So too did monkeys ignore grand designs. After dark, dozens would invade the state secretariat, scattering files and soiling the floor. They bit and clawed strollers and shoppers, without regard to rank or class. In red-brick slums and concrete colonies, monkeys were not just passing irritants; they settled in for a while. They became familiar with their neighbours, and surveyed the scene. Like any neighbour, they were opaque and difficult to read (Žižek, 2005). Soon enough, monkeys ransacked kitchens for food; ripped up items on the clothesline; and startled residents napping and showering. People complained to the municipality; and Nand Lal and his men removed the monkeys to Delhi's outskirts.

The problem was not new. For years, up to 25,000 monkeys had dwelt in the city. They perched on telephone towers, traipsed along boundary walls, and somersaulted in parking lots. Monkeys were so omnipresent that one could almost forget that they were there. The flashes of brown shaking tree branches and tramping on rooftops became humdrum. But when their energies found a focus, stepping over the line, monkeys were unwelcome.

At times, ordinary grievances merged into a collective swell. Planners and judges, custodians of Delhi's image, deemed the monkeys a liability. India was rising, and the capital had to be world-class. In the evolutionary order – development being a physiological fact and frame of mind – jungle became city and human tamed animal. The mood was tilting towards the predictable – streets and sanitation were rearranged to reflect a higher will. Officials directed this aspiration, insisting that humans run the show. The city sterilized street dogs, and removed cows and monkeys.

Yet in-built habits sometimes conspire against pre-made plans; it's especially striking when in the same person. The same residents who demanded the removal of monkeys fed them. The monkey, wild and unpredictable, was also a *devata* or

avatar of the divine. It could take on the *roop* of Hanuman, his physical form; at once brute mass, it was also a sacred vehicle. A person received *punya* – a diffuse, cleansing merit from God – by feeding monkeys. People bought fruit and placed it where monkeys gathered. Through this *dan* or gift, volatile energies were harnessed for one's protection. The catch was that the recipient also took on the giver's *paap* or sin (Parry, 1994; Raheja, 1988). In this way, the monkey was a conduit circulating a negative charge. Complicit in this matter of fact exchange, humans allowed monkeys to thrive.

The monkey – unofficial neighbour and sub-human god – collapsed familiar distinctions. They were, on the one hand, an enclosed bundle of interests and capacities. They had their own logic of movement and dwelling, intrigues and contests that others didn't get. And they were, in their fleshiness, undeniably different; their shrieks were opaque, the bristly tail unsettling.

But their routines and appetites criss-crossed with human ones. Looking at a monkey was like peering into a cracked mirror: something about those deliberate hand movements and the forthright gaze. Like Delhi's higher-order citizens, monkeys were hierarchical and guarded their territory. Nand Lal called the troop leaders *netas*, *mukhiyas*, or *sardars*, terms for big men and party leaders. Simians even mastered Delhi's civic ethos: they were nosy with, and aggressive towards, co-residents. They were both distinct from and enmeshed within human society. Straddling the familiar and far, monkeys were true strangers (Simmel, 1971). As was the reverse; humans were part of a monkey's life – and disruptive of it.

Nand Lal and his men were caught in this swirl of interests. They were jeered and attacked by the religiously minded when they made raids. Others hounded Nand Lal for different reasons. Animal-rights activists, sincere and well-reared, launched legal cases against him. They thought the monkeys' rights were violated when caught. The animals now had better protections than millions of Kashmiris and Nagas under military rule – more of India's fickle liberalism. Nand Lal tiptoed around these sensibilities. Many wanted the city purified – excision, in the language of rights. Yet residents also felt a duty to feed monkeys, accepting volatility in their midst.

This was why the baby rhesus, of Hanuman's army, was caged. Nand Lal, crouching, studied the monkey through the cage's pores. He saw it for what it was and what it could be: an uninvited guest; the embodied sacred; a barely tolerated neighbour; an interloper in the heart of civilization. It was also, for now, a kind of pet. The baby was to have been his quarry. It was caught on a raid and separated from its group. It panicked when dropped off outside the city and clung to the truck. The men tried again in the city, to be absorbed by another troop, but the monkeys attacked it. No one wanted an orphan; they had their own mouths to feed, their own line to nurture.

Now Nand Lal deliberated. For the moment, the baby stayed in the cage. But it could be sold or given to a monkey-entertainer. *Kalandars*, men who trained monkeys and bears to dance, entertained pedestrians. This trade was under pressure in the capital, from the same activists after the monkey catchers. Still, Nand Lal had a soft spot for *kalandars*, and connections among them. He was supposed to be a cog

in the machine, a mere agent of urban cleansing. But his idea of animals did not correspond to science and sentiment. Standing up, Nand Lal said he might pass on the baby, still pliable, to an entertainer, *chupke-chupke* – silently, stealthily. The monkey – annoying menace and sublime force, liberal subject and technocratic problem – might then become something else: a source of amusement.

Expansion and expulsion

Two months earlier, at the end of 2007, I met Nand Lal at the compound from where he worked. It was the first of a dozen meetings with Nand Lal and his men, over five months. Their base was a small open-air enclosure in Old Delhi, shielded by a black gauzy material on wire mesh, and two rosewood trees. Entering, one saw cages stacked awkwardly, like children's blocks teetering on the verge of collapse. Dented water bottles and frayed undershirts were snagged on the inner perimeter. What gave the place a sense of being lived-in, and seemed deliberate, was the far corner. A thin cotton mattress sat on two cages stacked sideways; this was Nand Lal's spot.

He was a slight man, barely five feet tall, and sported a bushy moustache, an untucked dress shirt, and white sneakers. He was relaxed; in fact, he was lying down. I'd come to see him often hold forth like this when not out trapping animals. Though his profession was, let us say, unaccredited, he was at ease with a visitor. Journalists had visited before; they had even asked the same questions. The anthropological age of discovery, it seems, is over; Nand Lal had heard it all before.

Buffeted by public demands, Nand Lal had to be image-savvy. This concern extended to his own visibility. Though I did not doubt his fame, he insisted that I sit nearby as he unfolded newspaper articles featuring him. Around us milled some of the other contractors, working-class men in their 30 s and 40 s. They were a motley bunch: migrants, Muslims, and tribals. Sikander and Yusuf, who lived in a slum in East Delhi, hoisted a cage with monkeys onto a waiting truck. These were soon taken to the sanctuary. Rajesh, from nearby Madhya Pradesh, and Basu, from Jharkhand, sorted peanuts, bananas, and dried chickpeas into polythene bags, preparing for a raid. It came to be a familiar scene, this prep-work and clean-up for their operations.

From the beginning, the men were ambivalent about their work. They hadn't imbibed the will to displace of city leaders. But they weren't blithe to the chafing between humans and monkeys. After showing me the news clippings, Nand Lal said, 'It is a hassle, living together with monkeys. They cut people, tear clothes, break house windows, grab small children, and harass girls.'

Living together – *ek sath rehna* – seemed difficult, to invite separation. Yet people did not decisively solve the issue; force evoked the same, a kind of blow-back. For Nand Lal, city-dwellers needlessly provoked monkeys: 'If you harass it, then it will stress you out' (*agar us ey pareshan karenge, toh woh aap ko pareshan karega*). The other men gathered to offer their two cents. Yusuf echoed this sentiment: 'Monkeys do not cause tension – rather it is people that cause problems.

They toss stones at monkeys, and even hit them with a stick. So monkeys go on the offensive and attack us.'

Underlying this destructive tit for tat were thornier issues. Monkeys, the men said, wanted to live in the open, to be unconfined. They didn't like being caged, and the sanctuary was just an enlarged trap. Nand Lal noted, 'You can feed them anything, but if they are in a cage, they will not be as happy as they would be in the open.' Sikander chimed in, 'If you keep them cooped up then they will never be happy'. Now Nand Lal: 'They are like humans – wanting to live in the open.' Sikander again: 'It's the monkey's nature, like us they find it nice to be in the open.'

The two contrasted living in the open (*khule mein rehna*) with being placed in a cage (*pinjare mein rakhna*). The monkey seemed that most evolved of creatures: the flâneur. Animals and the street stroller roamed about, studiously averse to routine. Humans sought this privilege for themselves, and divided nature and culture. Beings were slot into spaces: the city – the civic, the civilized – belonged to humans. The sanctuary was to be a bucolic home for animals, a simulacrum of the forest. Monkeys, however, were clear-eyed; they saw it as another kind of cage – which is why many escaped and came back to Delhi.

Here, too, division and expulsion mirrored the same. Thousands of migrants in city slums were being forced out. Yusuf lived in one such *basti* across the Yamuna in East Delhi. Rumours circulated of imminent relocation dozens of kilometres away. He spelled out the parallel: 'They want to clean up and make Delhi pretty so they're grabbing the poor and the monkeys and kicking them out.'

Yusuf lived on a dumping ground for displaced slum-dwellers dating to the 1970 s (Tarlo, 2003). At that time, it was scrub and wasteland; bit by bit it was overtaken by the metropolis. What was then called 'jungle' was now the city. Higher forces – developers and speculators – now had their eyes set on it, and these areas were being razed. Expansion was accompanied by excision; the monkey, of the jungle, had to go to the sanctuary that the city created. In Yusuf's terms, the unsightly went outside (*bahar*) to make the city clean and beautiful (*saaf-suthra*). These were the standard operating procedures, the necesary rituals, underpinning the modern city (Mitchell, 1988).

For Yusuf, the process was mystifying and jolting. Contradictory details came from ward politicians or utility officials; anxious jockeying by residents, some opposed to moving, others after a better deal, didn't help. The government, here, was a diffuse set of energies. The state, like the monkey, could be placated and coaxed towards one's goal. Yet it was a difficult beast, liable to cause aggravation, and even upend one's life. The surveyors and sub-inspectors who visited Yusuf's slum were to be handled with care.

He said, 'They say they will build concrete houses for us, but who knows what will happen?' To move, as Yusuf said, from a *kaccha* to *pucca makan* – from makeshift shanty to concrete house – was the worker's goal. *Kaccha* or raw things were of haphazard craft and dubious provenance; *kaccha kaam* referred to illicit kinds of work, while *kaccha sharab* was illegal hooch. The slum's flimsy

thatch and squishy mud was raw and provisional, something to escape from or improve upon. The government promised that Yusuf would cross a threshold, from raw to cooked, animal to human, nature to culture. But for every step forward, it was two steps back.

Yusuf was unsure how he would work when relocated far away. His family rhythms and social ties, incrementally built-up in the slum, would suffer when scattered. With few amenities and little work, with safety and child-care in question, the displaced often sold their dwellings and moved back to city slums. This banishment and encroachment was as regular as inhaling and exhaling; slum-dwellers and animals were part of an ebb and flow. Yusuf knew how indeterminate, how unfinished, this process was: 'It is difficult because there are so many animals, poor people, and destitute people. To remove them all is not so easy.' In their sheer plenitude, in the impress of their bodies and stubborn will, the animal, the poor, and the destitute (*janwar, garib, bhikari*) were unwanted surplus. Against the self-contained, modern man, they were residual subjects, the negative one wished not to see (Gandhi, 2010).

Yet these elements were disavowed but never quite eradicated. And circumscribed though it was by others, the metropolis was still pure potential, a space of possibility. The metropolis had not, despite scholarly lament, become aseptic and tamed. The capital – its smog and pace and aggression – was hazardous to human and animal. But the city was still their shared home, the prize that all fought over.

Urban stalemate

The monkey-catcher's compound, hidden from the street, was passed unawares by many. It was squashed between a wholesale bazaar and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's headquarters. The bazaar, Katra Neel, specialized in textiles. Chandni Chowk, a commercial thoroughfare, ran alongside, on which touts cajoled marriage aspirants to buy beaded *saris* and shiny silks. Within the bazaar, workers carried spools of fabric and gunny-sacks of unfinished cotton; others, arms resting on their foreheads, napped on wooden handcarts.

Other bazaars nearby also capitalized on the old city's legal porosity. They practised a kind of laissez-faire capitalism – extremely laissez. Behind Nand Lal's nook, the textile bazaar, over the objections of conservationists, ran over medieval mansions, with heavy goods stored on filigreed balconies. To the east, diffident to intellectual property laws, men in the Lajpat Rai bazaar hawked counterfeit porn in every skin tone and dialect. In the other direction, at the Tilak bazaar, specialists in industrial chemicals, immune to labour and safety niceties, brewed vats of corrosive liquid. By mid-day, these transactions merged, like the steady hum coming from a hive. Bells from cycle rickshaws mingled with car horns, temple songs, bazaar chatter, tea slurping, police sirens, and more.

The municipal buildings were divided between a British-built town hall and an annexe. The main structure was in the colonial style: whitewashed, Roman columns, looming arches. Inside, Delhi's mayor and councillors deliberated under portraits of independence heroes. Outside, in a small park – where statues of

Victorian royalty had been replaced with those of freedom fighters – drivers played cards. The annexe was less grand: a row of cold, concrete rooms topped with zinc sheets. Municipal workers considered the annexe akin to Siberia, a place one was banished to and forgotten.

In this annexe, officials dealt with wild animals in the capital. I met Dr Sharma, the veterinary officer for the zone covering the old city. After my identification card was given a laborious look-over by his peon, I sat with him. Trim, with a pencil moustache, Dr Sharma was a bureaucrat equally attuned to symbols and directives. Like Nand Lal, he recalled the foreign journalists that had visited. He saw their interest to be, well, self-interested: 'They think India is a land of snake-charmers. For them it is an amazing thing that Delhi has cows on the road. They want to show the people in Germany that India is still backward.' Snake-charmers and cows evoked that old story: India as land of lepers, not laptops.

When I probed the dynamics of animal-control, Dr Sharma insisted that monkeys were actually not within the municipal corporation's remit. In other words, they were not his problem. Wild, they were the responsibility of a parallel administration, the Delhi Government and its Wildlife Department. Another authority, the New Delhi Municipal Council, also had a stake. These governing silos – less a centralized force than feuding fiefdoms – passed the blame and buck back to one another. Decisive action seemed wanting, but politicians and judges could prod the municipality into motion.

This was especially evident on the heels of calamity, or at moments of self-consciousness. In October 2007, monkeys interrupted the Deputy Mayor on his balcony as he read the paper. Waving a stick, he lost his balance and fell to his death. Three years later, the city hosted the Commonwealth Games, and hired men armed with a *langur* – a black-faced monkey which the rhesus is afraid of – to stand at venues. This reflected the employing of third parties such as brokers and middlemen to deal with problems; the outsourcing here merely went beyond the species.

Otherwise, things proceeded in a half-hearted way. Nand Lal's men were paid 450 rupees – roughly ten dollars – per monkey. To placate activists, the process involved a veterinary check on captured animals. Then they were shifted to an old mine turned sanctuary on Delhi's southern fringe. But the seemingly leak-proof vessel of planning, set out to sea, was riddled with holes: checks were sometimes not done; no one knew how many animals were shifted out; and soon enough – the sanctuary was not stocked with enough food – they came right back to the city. It was as the men insisted: monkeys wanted to be free – in the concrete jungle.

Dr Sharma's office reflected this piecemeal response. Next to his desk was a wooden cabinet, with the left door ripped out. Inside, and on top, yellowing paper was tossed about; on the floor, light blue folders, tied together with string, sat next to a defunct air-cooler. The office symbolized the state; neither made pretence to smooth, efficient order. This contradicted the usual idea of power. On screen and paper, the government was all closed-circuit cameras and unruffled officers. It worked as synchronized movements overseen by an all-knowing eye. Critics of governance also took managerial efficiency, a bourgeois end-point, for granted

(Chatterjee, 2004). But visit a bureaucrat – or an Old Delhi bazaar – and a less sublime picture of power emerged (Hansen, 2001). The improvised administration was there for all to see, no match for non-linear, multi-species, rule-defying arrangements.

Underlying this was a deeper scepticism, an unease with the mantra of expulsion. Like Nand Lal, Dr Sharma had an equivocal view of belonging. After all, he said, 'Monkeys have not destroyed our home. Rather we have destroyed their habitat – the city is the home of monkeys.' Delhi was, in his view, the monkey's home (*monkey ka ghar*). Since the 17th century, Delhi had hosted distinct sovereigns: Mughal, British, Indian. Each changeover had been marked by violent purification. In this way, the capital's ethnic and demographic composition had been set and reset. During India's independence in 1947, Muslim residents fled for Pakistan. Punjabi refugees poured in, becoming the default population. Millions of migrants from elsewhere in the region also came.

Yet howsoever mixed the city was, some fit while others did not. Sikhs were victims of 1980s rioting; their turbans and beards demarcated their difference. Indian Muslims, and resident Bangladeshis and Afghans, were picked up by the police; Islam was deemed alien to Hindustan. Students from northeast states were groped and taunted; much was made of their narrow eyes and meaty diet. Each claim on Delhi, every attempt to imprint itself for eternity, parsed who belonged and who didn't.

Through it all, a constant, true natives of sorts, were the monkeys. But then they became targets, turning things inside out. Now, with things so muddled, the claim to autochthony – that game of who came first – could only be feigned. Still, somebody had to go; things couldn't go on like this. In this way, Delhites submerged their mutual grudges by ritually removing a common antagonist (Girard, 1979).

This dynamic was plain when humans and monkeys interacted. South of the old city stood the Delhi Zoological Park. At the dark, spartan monkey cages, visitors threw peanuts and made loud noises. The authorities, seemingly embarrassed, played to visitors' guilt. The Zoo Commandments intoned: 'Do not tease the animals. They also have emotions just like us.' A painted sign at the entrance showed a man in a cage; a lion, bear, elephant, and monkey stood outside, laughing and nibbling on the man's limbs. It read: 'PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR PLACE: DO NOT TEASE ZOO ANIMALS OR ANY ANIMALS.' But there was something about a caged primate that made people act out, evoking the ludic and cruel. Teenagers stuck their tongues out and grabbed their crotches; some cackled in high-pitched voices and threw debris lying on the ground. The mesh cage was installed to protect humans from animals; now it served the opposite purpose.

Back in the old city was the Meena Bazaar. There, alongside families climbing stairs to a mosque and men roasting kebabs, stood *kalandars*, the monkey-entertainers. They appeared furtively, conscious of raids that might occur. They acquired a stretch of pavement, and sat with a small drum and monkey, while a crowd enveloped them. One hand fluttered over the drum, while the other held a chain that slid up to the monkey's neck. The men would sing devotional or popular

songs, anything with a good beat; in between, they hammed it up. The *kalandars*, with raised eyebrows and exaggerated voices, called their wards *pehelwan* (wrestler), *pyaare* (my love), *Shah Rukh* (a film star).

Spectators, stopping momentarily and then melting back to the bazaar, laughed easily, eating it up. There was something irresistible and hypnotic about an animal tamed. The animals were objects of ridicule; they were there to be laughed at. Their masters would dress them in girls' frocks. They stood on their hind legs, and a tail dropped down; but above the waist, frilly borders and paisley designs stood out. The monkeys, despite the frocks, despite the metal chain and crowd, had placid expressions. They did not evince outrage at being shackled; nor seem the least bit embarrassed dressed as a child. Their eyes dull and lips flat, they knew the drill; they were professionals. Jarring though the monkeys seemed, for passersby, for the simians, gyrations were all in a day's work.

The *kalandars* called their work mischievous fun (*khel-tamasha*). But it was more than this; their monkeys were trained to fold their hands in the context of *dua*, a prayer. Like their wild cousins on the street, they were many things at once. So an otherworldly current animated city-life; and this enchantment could even be purchased.

The animal entertainers made part of their income from selling *taveez* or magical amulets to pedestrians. You watched the show, then you bought a lion's tooth (*sher ka daant*), a small bear's hair (*reech ka bal*), or a black bear's claw (*bhalu ka nakhun*). These talismans promised the animal's raw potency, for cures and black magic (*jadu-tona*). The monkey entertainer – and other nomadic, tribal, and Muslim vendors in the bazaar, selling animal-derived tonics – proved the power of mimesis. A peripheral community has access to powerful knowledge; others desire this secret for their own benefit (Taussig, 1991 [1986]).

The performing monkeys were domesticated; those caught by Nand Lal were wild; the ones at the zoo were in between, their energies clenched by civilization. But all belonged in a compartment outside. Whether one watched them dancing to a drum, or being caught by Nand Lal, or sullen in a zoo cage, the monkeys affirmed, if briefly, a commonality between humans. The laughter at and fear of the monkey created a fleeting bond.

But this unity in enmity had a short shelf-life; the larger arc of the story was unclear. Deadlines for total monkey eradication were trumpeted – but then qualified, ignored, disavowed. People spoke of migrant and monkey invasions, demonstrating their right to stay; yet the moment of resolution was deferred. The jostling might not lead to a winner or loser, but a tragic stalemate. Civilization reassured itself by putting what didn't fit out. Yet the city's leakiness suggested the jumble of kinds would endure.

A porous taxonomy

After meeting the baby rhesus in early 2008, I returned several times. Over months, I saw how deeply Nand Lal and his workers studied monkeys; like hunters, they

were intimate with their prey. They knew what monkeys liked to eat, and how much sex they had. And they did not always mark borders between themselves and their quarry. On this topic, the men were fickle and contradictory – like the monkeys, prone to shape-shifting.

The men agreed that both people and simians contained *jeev* or *jaan* – life force. All beings with breath – gods, humans, insects – shared it. From this commonality, complex affinities emerged. I found Nand Lal one day mending rope that had frayed; squatting on his haunches, his hands working quickly, he said: 'Monkeys are like us – they also have a *dil-o-dimaag* [heart and mind].' It was not just that the animals resembled humans, or had the same capacities. *Dil* or heart, and *dimaag* or mind, were not even accorded to all humans. Nand Lal continued: 'Monkeys also think through things, and feel pleasure and pain. When one of their group dies, they get sad and gather to grieve.' Ritualized grief, deep reflection – monkeys resembled humans more and more.

Yet what a semi-literate tribal like Nand Lal found banal – beings exist on different planes at once, with various latent capacities – Western intellectuals found revelatory. Some invented theories of multi-species and trans-humanist life that – seizing on animal consciousness – corrected human vanity (Haraway, 2007). On the ground, it was less rosy. The multi-valence of the monkey – that it could be dumb beast and divine avatar at once – all too often reflected the human. In 2001, an urban legend emerged around a Delhi creature dubbed the monkey-man. Said to wreak havoc at night, the monster did what monkeys did: invade homes, induce dread, and injure others. These were also things that humans did. The monkey and monkey-man, then, were reflections of the human – including the unseemly bits. Slippery and inscrutable, the rhesus evoked the danger and anomie of metropolitan life.

Sikander thought the monkey-man was a human that took on the form of the black-faced *langur* monkey or vice versa. It didn't matter which, for any being could take on another's form. Many things in the city – inanimate and animate, human and non-human – could be a *devata* or avatar. Neighbourhood deities and local spirits roamed freely; like the monkeys, they were said to eat too much and possess a temper.

The men didn't know that, faraway, the monkeys were used to question the West's human-centrism. They might have been sceptical of the talk of permeable boundaries. The unsavoury dimension of motivation – which did anything but subvert power – was abundantly evident. Feeding a monkey constituted a gift called *dan*. The menace that monkeys embodied – removing clothes from laundry lines, invading kitchens in search of snacks, rifling through papers in offices – was mirrored by the function of feeding. One sought to placate an unstable being through a ritual of supplication.

Dan could be given to a beggar or animal or low-caste person. Inherently, structurally, they could not reciprocate; the giver simply received *punya*, divine recognition. Yet the urge to use others, to gratify oneself, was there. Nand Lal said: 'People who feed these animals pin hopes [*ummeed*] onto them. They think that feeding the monkey will help [*bhala*] them. It is for their greed [*lalach*] that people feed monkeys

so that Hanuman will benefit them.' These terms were not innocent. *Ummeed* implied a hunger for something no matter the cost; *bhala* was used when one got their due cash or praise; and *lalach* was greed, unadorned and simple.

In theory, *dan* was self-negating, unlike most gifts. It was presented as pure generosity, with no strings attached. But the structure of the gift means that something of the giver is transacted alongside the object in question (Mauss 1990 [1924]). In the case of donated *dan*, sin or *paap* was transferred onto the recipient (Parry, 1994; Raheja, 1988). The giver got rid of their suffering with little cost; the recipient drank from a poisoned chalice. It could be considered a feedback loop: self-interest became, through human giving to monkeys, the latter's burden. Delhi's simian menace, then, was not wildness threatening civilization; monkeys wrestled with a negativity that was human in origin. Complainants to the municipality were misrecognizing the source of instability. The monkey was not outside the human; it was their double. Humans pulled off a wicked transaction: displacing sin onto another, all the while humming the tune of selflessness. This instrumental act was paralleled by Western theorists, who needed the monkey – and seemed oblivious as it squirmed away from their purpose.

In line with this, Nand Lal's men weren't as generous as him in collapsing human and non-human. Basu, for example, agreed – it was incontestable, really – that all beings shared *jeev*, the life force. But differences could be asserted that hinged on higher faculties. For example, small creatures such as *jeev-jantu* or insects had life force; but they were not as sophisticated as *janwar* or animals; and these were quite apart from humans, or *insaan*. Life force didn't matter as much as the capacity to be trained properly and reared correctly. Basu said: 'People are people, and monkeys are animals – the monkeys are wild. The monkey is a destructive jungle-man who causes a lot of tension.' His terminology was striking: *jungli* and *banmanush* were for both wild animals and unruly humans. Such a being was uncivilized, even destructive, and belonged outside the city. As Basu concluded: 'Animals just shouldn't be in the same space as us' (*insaanon ke beech mein janwar nahin hona chahiye*). The urban and advanced, the men had told me, were *budhiman* or brillant; *chalaak* or clever; and had *samajh* or sense. So people belonged in the city, and animals belonged there – anywhere else.

Nand Lal had been charitable in ascribing human qualities – of emoting and reflecting – to animals. But if, for him, the line between human and animal was blurred, the other men kept the monkey as foil and foe.

Temporary exile

I came to the old city compound one morning towards the end of my visits. I hadn't called first, and found the men were preparing to go on a raid. The baby rhesus was gone. I asked Sikander, fixing a cage latch, what happened. He said: 'We tried two to three more times [to release him] but he keeps running back to us each time! It's dangerous for him out in the city . . . so we will raise him ourselves.' He took the baby back to his slum, feeding and housing it. The animal, like many others in

Delhi, existed in the grey zone: neither one thing nor the other, out of place but at least covered by a roof. Yusuf existed in a similar state; his slum's leader or *pradhan* worked out a reprieve with councillors regarding their eviction. How long it would last, or if this truce would be respected by others, was unclear. The city was lived in ambiguity and suspension.

The men loaded cages from the enclosure onto two Tata trucks. They were headed to an industrial training institute in Jehangirpuri, after monkey attacks against students. I asked if I could come along and Nand Lal agreed. Smiling, he suggested a place in the back, amidst the cages; I was soon upgraded to the cabin. I sat there between a driver, a monkey-catcher, and a forest department ranger. There was the faint odour of garbage – in a previous incarnation, the truck hauled trash. We snaked out of the old city and onto the highway, and the men's cigarette ash swirled around the cabin. Talk turned to the legal cases pending against Nand Lal. The ranger, there to ensure the monkeys were safely caught, dismissed them. They were, he said, 'nothing to sweat about' (*koi pareshani nahin hai*).

The institute was located in a lower-middle-class area of north Delhi. Arriving there, the trucks entered a compound next to a two-storey building. A slum clustered around the boundary wall. We were greeted by the institute's director, who showed us glass panes that were shattered, and a laboratory where monkeys broke microscopes. Nand Lal and his men huddled and quickly made the arrangements. There were several monkeys squatting and grooming one another next to the institute's brick walls. Clearly there were a lot of monkeys; Nand Lal guessed around 60.

Nand Lal directed two of his men to set things up. They lowered a cage onto a grassy area in front of the building, which they lined with peanuts and bananas. When the monkeys saw the food inside the cage, they would enter it through a trap door, on which a cord was tied. One of the monkey-catchers, camouflaged by shrubs some metres away, held the other end. Once the monkey was inside, the man dropped the cord and the trap door would slam. The men attached a smaller cage to it, goading the captured into this enclosure, and with the big cage now free, repeated the process.

The rest of us – myself, the drivers, Nand Lal, the institute's director – sat some distance away. There was plenty of waiting, and then a periodic flurry of activity. Slowly the monkeys would circle the cage, focused on the bananas and peanuts. They would hesitate, retreat, and then, the food on display too tempting, make their move. Once a monkey had made it in, the trap door was shut, and the men ran over. The monkey, once caught, leapt from one side to another in a panicked way. After a while, some became passive, accepting their fate, but a few persisted, shaking their prison. The men jabbed these ones through the cage with a bamboo stick. Eventually subdued, the monkeys were transferred to the smaller cage; then the men retreated and waited. The process did involve force; but the men were anxious that 'no monkeys should be troubled'. They made a point of giving the animals plenty to eat, an expense paid out of their pockets, not by the city.

Slowly, the raid became a bit of a show. Young children from the adjacent slum poked their heads out from the tops of their corrugated roofs. The institute's

students stood outside the entrance, sipping *chai* and joking. As the day proceeded, and a few were caught, the other monkeys were watching too, dozens standing just out of reach. Some grunted and sprinted over to where the workers stood, kicking up dirt. Watching these aggressive rushes, studying their flared nostrils and calculating gaze, I understood how monkeys could haunt humans. No wonder the monkey-man, the monster that had stalked Delhi years earlier, took on a simian form: it was a familiar estrangement that victims must have felt.

Meanwhile, during the waiting, I chatted with the forest department ranger and monkey-catchers. The ranger, a well-educated man overseeing the contractors, disparaged the 'superstitious' residents who fed monkeys. He also mocked the self-interested motive for feeding them, for gifting *dan*: 'The ones who feed these monkeys, they definitely think, I'm going to get divine merit out of it' (*jo log inko khilate hai, woh souchte zaroor hoonge, ki kuch punya milenge*).

As I had seen before, the catchers quickly gave the animals personalities. The leader of this troop was termed *shehr ka bandar*, or an urban monkey. They called it *chalaak* or clever; it was stubborn and provocative. Subordinate monkeys were seen as dimwits, unable to resist the food laid out. Nand Lal called them *gunga* or dumb ones; sure enough, they ambled into the cage with little prodding. He also called passive ones *dehati bandar*, or rustic monkey. Animal states again reflected human ones; the same schism (*shehr* or urbane versus *dehati* or backward) was used to contrast Delhi's yuppies and pretenders.

The whole operation was artisanal rather than technocratic. Despite the municipal orders, legal judgments, and veterinary reports hovering over the raid, Nand Lal depended on his instincts and guile. He was against a wily and agile opponent in a porous city, with innumerable cracks to escape into. It was a battle of the intellect, with each party playing mind games and changing tactics, using whatever tools at their disposal.

Nand Lal always made sure that the alpha male was not caught first; when this happened, the rest of the troop would immediately leave. On this day, they left the *neta* or leader, and talked of returning to get him. The whole while, he stayed at a distance, called attention to himself, glaring and charging to squeals from onlookers. By the end, the crowd was giddy, horsing around and cursing, throwing pebbles, and, when the animals made dashes, running and shrieking. Over six hours, the monkey-catchers collected a dozen monkeys. Nand Lal told me that they would return in a week or so. In the meantime, the caught monkeys, each in a small cage, were hauled onto the trucks; they would now be taken for a veterinary check. The back was open and all of us – the institute's students, Nand Lal and myself, random passersby – crowded around. The monkeys sat quietly and peeled fruit as the truck started and shook. Unwanted residents, they would be shipped onwards to the sanctuary. They were going; they'd likely be back.

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