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The Social Science Imagination in India: Deconstructing Boundaries and Redefining Limits

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The social sciences have played a significant role in challenging and politicising various forms of exploitation. However, Indian social science discourse has largely ignored the exploitation that is inherent in most human–non-human relationships and, at times, even actively delegitimised any efforts to question the same. This paper tries to understand why the ethical aspects of human–non-human (specifically, animal) interactions have remained outside social science analysis. It does so by examining the arguments used to support such exclusion and by exploring a range of taken-for-granted differences between human and non-human animals. The analysis suggests that the reluctance of the Indian social sciences to engage with this question is unjustified. In doing so, it points to the need for social sciences to continually question the exclusionary power of their boundaries by deploying an empathetic and self-reflexive imagination.

[Keywords: environmental ethics; non-human animals; politics of knowledge; speciesism; the social sciences in India]

From the Sociological Imagination to the Social Science Imagination

C. Wright Mills, in his classic 1959 text, makes a case for the ‘sociological imagination’: a quality of mind that is necessary to understand society and social and personal phenomena. To Mills, the sociological imagination is a prerequisite for anyone seeking to make sense of life and the world, as it provides the ability to understand the interrelations between society and the individual, history and biography, and helps to ‘make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference’ (1959: 13); to Mills, the sociological imagination is the

‘capacity to shift from one perspective to another’ and will be the ‘major common intellectual denominator’ of the era (*ibid.*: 7, 14). Mills also contends that the sociological imagination has a critical role to play in the ‘intellectual and political tasks of social analysis’ (*ibid.*: 21) and in moving beyond the ‘pretentious mediocrity’ (*ibid.*: 20) that is seen in the social sciences.

Exploitation, violence, and injustice have long been a focus of social science inquiry, and the field has engaged with these themes in both descriptive and interventional/political manners (Latour 2005). As Satish Saberwal puts it, ‘the social sciences, including sociology, are double faced: on one side, these look for ways to understand “what things are like”; on the other, this understanding, it is hoped, would enable us to influence “what things ought to be like”’ (2004: 419). While to Saberwal and B. Latour, this dual role can pose difficulties, the involvement of the social sciences in challenging exploitation and hierarchies that legitimise marginalisation – to put it simply, in subaltern politics – has been and continues to be crucial (Baviskar 2008).

However, the social sciences themselves have played active and passive roles in perpetuating exploitation (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), and the social science imagination has often been slow to expand its ‘frontiers of justice’, a term I borrow from Martha C. Nussbaum (2006). The social sciences started as studies of western societies, and gradually (reluctantly and otherwise) evolved to include that which was not previously considered as belonging to its domain – the concerns of women, transgender, and gay people, for instance.

In India, the modern social sciences were born during the colonial period, and served mostly to develop ‘cultural technologies to rule’ (Yadav 2006: 3847). After independence, the task of nation building helped set agendas for the field, and it was only much later that issues related to children, dalits, women, etc. entered its boundaries (Rao 1982; Chaudhuri 2003; Rege 2003). Surveys of research in sociology and social anthropology undertaken by the Indian Council for Social Science Research point to the expanding boundaries of the Indian social sciences; while the first two surveys (up to 1969 and 1969–1979) barely mention women or gender as groups/themes of social science study, the third survey (1980–87) has an entire chapter devoted to ‘women’s studies and women’s development’ (ICSSR 1972/1974, 1985, 2000). Sharmila Rege (2003) also describes a similar evolutionary process in Indian sociology with respect to women, and demonstrates how it was only in the 1980s that women’s studies became important. A survey of the *Economic and Political Weekly* shows the same trend – while the 13-year period from 1966 to 1979 has only twenty-one papers on the subject of women, the

next five years (1980-85) see a proliferation (forty papers) of discussions on this subject (Ghosal 1997).

This paper suggests that there is a continued need for the Indian social sciences to question and push their boundaries. It does so by exploring an example of an exploitative relationship that continues to elude the imagination of modern social science in India despite its all-pervasive presence – the human–non-human relationship.

The Non-Human, ‘Social Facts’, and the Social Sciences

While one plausible explanation for this absence could be that the social sciences are concerned with *only* human beings, and *not* the non-human, two factors compel us to rethink this reasoning. First, the history of the social sciences shows us that the intellectual community has over time played a key role in maintaining exploitation by deeming specific groups as being outside the purview of academic debate – by excluding them from ‘knowledge’ or the discipline. As N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln note in their discussion on disciplinary imaginaries, ‘the social sciences are normative disciplines, always already embedded in issues of value, ideology, power, desire, sexism, racism, domination, repression and control’ (2005: 13). Feminist literature points to the epistemological exclusion of women, and Michel Foucault (1998) has elaborated on the power-knowledge nexus. Second, it is important to recall Mills’ assertion that all social analysts who are ‘imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked ... [w]hat is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another?’ (1959: 6).

It is an indisputable fact that society as a whole and human beings as individuals are constantly interacting with non-human life. Therefore, *no* attempt to understand human nature or social phenomena is going to be complete when these ‘essential components’ of human life are not engaged with seriously.¹ This has been discussed before: for instance, Ramachandra Guha (1994) and M. Smith (2001) show that while the social sciences for long followed Emile Durkheim’s maxim that ‘social facts’ can be explained only by other ‘social facts’, the emergence of environmental concerns led to the recognition that there is a need to take into account the environment in which we live, of which we are a part. As Mills says, meaningful social science is contingent on the ability ‘to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two’ (1959: 7). The social sciences, in order to fulfil their potential, should, therefore, at the very least, be critically analysing the ways in

which human beings relate to non-human Others, and uncovering the implications of these relationships for both 'human nature' and the 'non-human Other'.

It is in such a context that I survey the manners in which non-human beings, specifically non-human animals,² have been ignored and, at times, even delegitimised, as a subject of social science scholarship in India, and deconstruct the assumptions and views that have possibly prevented the human–non-human life relationship from gaining legitimacy as a subject of academic contemplation. The paper points to the contradictions in and the lack of foundation for such views, and reminds that dominant social science discursive formations have often been implicated in processes of exploitation that are linked to such epistemological exclusion. While the particular case discussed in the paper is, for reasons of analytical simplicity, that of non-human animals, the core argument of the paper relates to social science boundaries and their exclusionary effects in general. The main objective of the paper is to question the seeming appropriateness and normality of accepted boundaries; therefore, despite the term 'redefining' in the title, it does not suggest new imaginative limits, as doing so would be antithetical to its purpose. Rather, it calls for a renewed Indian social science imagination that is engaged in a *continual* process of self-examination and redefinition, for only such a non-complacent and critical approach can be the foundation of a truly inclusive, dynamic, and progressive academic field.

The Non-Human Animal and Indian Social Science

Across the world, the human–non-human relationship is largely exploitative, and the situation is no different in India. As G. Elder *et al.* observe, while the legitimacy and acceptability of different types of human-animal relationships vary across cultures, what is remarkable is the 'universality of human violence toward animals' (1998: 87). Indian social science, however, has more or less excluded the non-human animal as a *subject of concern* (as different from an *object of study*) by both (i) ignoring and (ii) actively delegitimising its interests. That is, while the human–non-human relationship is considered in terms of its impacts on *human* interests, the impacts of the same relationship on the *non-human* is not included in mainstream social science inquiry.

Absence

The ignoring of the non-human animal is evidenced by its *absence* in social science literature. For example, surveys of the *Sociological*

Bulletin (1952–2008³) and the *Indian Social Science Review* (1999–2005⁴) reveal a total lack of articles that engage with the non-human as a focus of concern. A search of the *Economic and Political Weekly*'s web archives (from 1999 onwards; keywords: 'animal', 'environment', 'non-human', and 'animal rights') did offer a few exceptions (Samanta 2006; Srinivasan and Nagaraj 2007; Kothari 2009), but the overall evidence points to a highly anthropocentric scholarship. For example, the only article that answered to the term 'animal rights', begins on a balanced note calling for NGO and state programmes for the livelihood rehabilitation of communities that use performing animals such as dancing bears, but ends up concluding that the sight of children performing in bear costumes is 'a poignant reminder of *where* the priorities of an animal rights campaign should lie' (Radhakrishna 2007: 4225; emphasis added). To give another instance, an editorial piece (EPW 2000: 1417) on zoos examines the proposed closure of the Nagpur zoo from a predominantly instrumental angle – it calls for the development of Indian zoos as the '[c]reative expansion of zoos provides an opportunity for creative education in ecology as well as a base for Indian science to contribute to the expanding knowledge base in zoology and conservation of forest and animal wealth', completely bypassing the debates on the ethics of the same (Anderson 1998; Acampora 2005).

While there does exist some work on the ethics of human–non-human relationships, this has often been a part of religious texts (for example, the Buddhist and Jaina texts), thus making it a matter for consumption by only the religiously inclined, especially in the context of a secular democracy. There is also an overlooking of secular scholarship that engages politically with the non-human animal: for example, Mohandas K. Gandhi's vegetarianism and his condemnation of the use of animals in medical research in *Hind Swaraj* (1939: 59), Shiv Visvanathan's discussion of theosophy's critique of the use of animals in science (1997), and work in philosophy (such as Srivastava 2005) are rarely, if ever, discussed in mainstream social science research and education.

This is not to say that human–non-human relationships are not studied by Indian social science. Indian environmental social science has devoted much attention to this, but this has remained largely anthropocentric in concern, with the non-human treated largely as an object to be managed and distributed (for example, Shiva and Bandhopadhyay 1991; Krishna 1996, 2004). Literature on environmental ethics and politics has been mainly centred on the 'question of social justice, of allowing the poor to have as much claim in the fruits of nature as the powerful' (Guha 2000: vi), or how environmental protection (or the lack

of it) affects human societies, and how we must ‘treat’ non-human life so as to ensure our own survival and wellbeing (for example, Shahabuddin *et al.* 2007). Indra Munshi’s review article on the ‘environmental concerns of social scientists in India’ (2000: 251) also indicates an overtly human-focused agenda, and she opines that an underexplored dimension is the human-nature relationship. There does exist literature on conservation (Singh 2003; Thapar 2003; Gadgil 2005; Guha 2007; Shahabuddin and Rangarajan 2007) that focuses on the concerns of the non-human, but this is restricted to charismatic and/or ecologically valuable, keystone species and biodiversity in general. In such literature, the emphasis is on the ecological and aesthetic benefits of conservation, and domestic or non-exotic animals are not accorded any importance. Even these positions, however, have remained marginal and are often delegitimised, as I shall show below.

Illegitimacy

While, at one level, the non-human animal is absent from social science discussion because of neglect and a heavy emphasis on solely human concerns, at another level, any academic or activist move to attend to the non-human animal has invited delegitimation by mainstream academia in various forms.

The post-colonial era in India saw ‘fierce debates relating to the need for an indigenous approach vis-à-vis the importation and imitation of western paradigms’ of social science knowledge (Mukherji 2006: 175). While this trend has positively reshaped the contours of the social sciences, it has also been rather perversely used to stop any debate on the ethics of human–non-human animal relationships in India. Standard Indian social science literature, while discussing protection of non-human nature, has often argued that these ideas are part of imposed western hegemony and neo-colonialism (for example, Agarwal 1994). Take the case of wildlife conservation,⁵ for instance. The practice of identifying protected areas for non-human animals is typically criticised (Baviskar 1997) as being a western and elite plot to deprive the Third World populace of their ‘natural resources’. In yet another instance of such a standpoint, Guha and J. Martinez-Alier say that ‘the initial impetus for setting up parks ... came from ... ex-hunters turned conservationists belonging mostly to the declining Indian feudal elite, and ... international agencies ... seeking to transplant the American system of national parks on to Indian soil’, and that deep ecology’s emphasis on wilderness preservation ‘provides an impetus to the imperialist yearnings of Western biologists’ (1997: 95-96).

Despite this distaste for the ‘western’ concern for the non-human animal, in sharp contrast, there is not much hesitation on the part of the Indian academia (or activist sector, for that matter) when it comes to importing concepts such as human rights, affirmative action, women’s rights, human development, etc. And, while the social sciences have repeatedly questioned the use of *western* concepts and frameworks to understand *indigenous* cultures, there is a readiness, as we shall see in the following section, to accept the use of *human* standards such as rationality to understand and value *non-human* animals (Wolch 1998). This is akin to saying that a human is of less value because he/she cannot find/see in the dark or does not have a sense of smell that is as keen as a dog’s.

The charge of elitism has constantly dogged any discourse that is protective of the non-human animal. For example, wildlife conservation is often seen as embodying the vested interests of urban elites (Vasan 2005). To Amita Baviskar, ‘the Silent Valley power project promoted by the Government of Kerala – which was given up by the Centre because it threatened tropical rainforests – was an instance of the success of elitist environmentalism’ (1997: 196-7), and to Guha and Martinez-Alier ‘Southern lovers of the wilderness come typically from patrician backgrounds’ (1997:19). This arises from the idea that only economically well-off people are concerned about non-human animals; while it is certainly true that people from the upper economic classes are the most visible in animal protection work and politics, what is not true is the inference that other sections of society are not sympathetic to non-human animals, even and especially non-charismatic ones such as street dogs. Anyone working in the field of animal welfare will agree that the poor are, in general, more generous in sharing their limited space and food with animals than well-off people.

Now it *is* true to an extent that only someone whose basic needs are already taken care of is likely to get involved in politics for another living being. But this fact is not peculiar to the non-human animal cause; if there are disadvantaged people found at the forefront of struggles around human marginalisation, it is because they have a personal stake in the discourse – the communities living in the Narmada Valley marched to Delhi and protested the Sardar Sarovar project only when they realised that they were losing their homes and livelihoods. And usually it is only the ‘elite’ who can afford to participate in such politics even though they do not have a personal stake.⁶ Baviskar (1997) points out that many grassroots social movements are based on the coming together of urban middle-class activists and the local affected populations. Medha Patkar and Aruna Roy are two examples. In the case of non-human animals,

those who have a personal stake – the non-human animals – cannot communicate in human language and are, therefore, not in a position to participate, just like infants and the cognitively challenged. This has the consequence that any political action carried out in their name has an ‘elitist’ face.

There are other contradictions. While we condemn ‘inviolate’ spaces for wildlife (Shahabuddin *et al.* 2007), we support ‘inviolate’ spaces such as cities for human beings where tigers, monkeys, ‘stray’ dogs, and rats are not welcome, and are, in fact, killed, trapped, or chased out without question. Similarly, there is a strong trend in Indian social science discourse to actively (and rightly) support the rights of tribal groups over their ancestral lands (Gadgil and Guha 1992; Bhatia 2005). This position is based on the fact that these groups have historically lived on these lands and, therefore, as the original inhabitants, have far more claim over these regions than the state or colonial ‘masters’, and that they have been the victims of ‘historical injustice’ (Forest Rights Bill 2005, cf. Bhatia 2005: 4891). But this position changes when it comes to non-human animals. Surely, non-human animals and plants have even more ancestral claim to the land than any human community? Why not consider them the victims of ‘historical injustice’ as well, and as having more claim over our cities and forests than their colonising masters – humans, in this case?

In India, an anti-non-human stance seems to be more or less built into the psyche of the progressive social scientist. One common argument is that India, being a country with a large and poor human population, cannot afford to expend time and resources on concerns of the non-human, as Baviskar (1997) describes in her survey of Indian environmental social science. This implies that concern and politics for one issue/group requires the dismissal of other issues/groups as illegitimate and unimportant. By the same logic, scholars/activists concerned with women’s issues should dismiss caste-related discrimination as irrelevant, and those working on caste exploitation should consider action against child abuse a waste of time.

An anti-non-human stance also stems from the mistaken conflation of meat politics with caste-class politics. The animal becomes a pawn in sectarian politics, and any pro-animal discourse is immediately decried on the grounds that it implies an elitist, casteist, and non-secular vegetarianism. Meat eating is widely seen as a progressive act in India because vegetarianism is associated with Hindu upper-caste eating practices. As Kancha Ilaiah puts it, ‘Vegetarian’ is a synonym for ‘Brahmin’ (1996: 68).

There is an element of truth to this because Hindutva political lobbies and their demand for bans on cow slaughter have come to be associated with vegetarianism (Ahmad 2005). This association of non-human animal politics with Hindutva ideology and politics has arguably been exacerbated by the affiliation of India's only animal activist-politician, Maneka Gandhi, with the Bharatiya Janata Party. This, and the charge of elitism discussed earlier, have the consequence that non-human animal politics is often seen as violating the culture and dietary habits, and destroying the livelihoods of, marginalised communities (Ahmad 2005; Radhakrishna 2007). For example, J. Jayalalitha's (the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu) 2003 ban on animal sacrifice in temples by invocation of the Tamil Nadu Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act was interpreted and opposed by 'secularists ... as a step towards homogenising existing Hinduisms in the image of Brahminism', leading to the repeal of the ban (Pandian 2005: 2313).

However, to conclude from such unfortunate connections that all animal ethics and politics is linked to caste-class hegemony is factually incorrect. And to ignore the obvious violence and suffering involved in the ways we use non-human animals and to legitimise their exploitation in the name of countering discrimination is a careless response in the Indian academia. For example, I. Ahmad asserts that, in a pluralistic society, meat-based food habits ought not to be challenged because pluralism is the 'coexistence with more or less tension in the same social space of many systems of global convictions and of the communities who produce them' (2005: 4979). But do we defend the caste system, *devadasi* dedication, human sacrifice, *purdah* (forced seclusion of women), or genital mutilation while upholding cultural rights, traditional livelihoods, or pluralism? Even polygamy is increasingly being seen as unacceptable (Engineer 2004).

Furthermore, a truly ethical standpoint can *never* be based on meaningless bans on cow slaughter,⁷ but would rather imply a vegan lifestyle, one that avoids milk, deerskin, and ghee – which are the cornerstones of Brahmanical rituals and eating habits – and one that shuns violence of any kind, including towards humans. In addition, it must be emphasised that it is not marginal communities who are the most implicated in animal exploitation and abuse; rather, the higher an individual on the economic ladder, the greater her/his harmful impacts on non-human animals, say, for example, due to increased access to medical technologies, leather shoes, silk clothes, or simply higher levels of consumption. Therefore, discourses that are truly pro-animal can never be anti-poor or anti-minority in a communitarian sense. It is the actions and relationships that are critiqued, and not the communities.

One other common dismissal tactic is to relegate human-animal relationships to the domains of emotions and morality. This is made evident by recourse to the derogatory appellation ‘animal lover’ (Balasubrahmanyam 1991: 2860) or ‘wilderness lover’ (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997: 19). Love is an emotion, and U. Narayan points out that ‘emotions have always been regarded as totally opposed to reason and as always impediments to knowledge’ (1988: 32). Similarly, moral arguments in favour of the non-human animal are not regarded as being acceptable because morality is seen as not conducive to cultural pluralism (Kumar 2006). We forget that social justice is an equally morality-laden concept when we delegitimise animal ethics as non-progressive morality. Another position is that the human–non-human animal relationship is a matter for the *personal* domain – it is not a *political* issue – as is evidenced by arguments for cultural relativism in the context of human-animal relationships. In saying this, we forget the hard won success of feminist theory and politics in establishing that the *personal is political*. Of course, it still may be argued that only human beings ‘make’ the political, as only they can participate in it, but such an argument would imply that non-participants like children or the mentally challenged would have to be excluded from the ‘political’ domain along with non-human animals.

The Exclusionary Politics of Social Science Knowledge

Before going on to the politics of knowledge, let us look at one simple example of how the Indian social sciences are limiting themselves because of the exclusion of the non-human as a subject of concern. Hydroelectric and other mega development projects have been the subject of much debate and critique in the Indian social sciences (Parasuraman and Cernea 1999; Khagram 2004). While much attention is given to the impacts on the local communities that are displaced, impacts on non-human animals is limited to an analysis of ‘environmental’ costs and long-term environmental damage. What is ignored is that while the human inhabitants of the area, on paper at least, are entitled to resettlement, the non-human animals have no choice but to drown in the rising waters. The few that manage to flee are killed when they enter human settlements because they are seen encroaching ‘inviolable’ human settlements and posing a threat to human well-being. Despite this, there is absolutely no discussion at all of resettling and rehabilitating the non-human victims of development projects. At the most, compensatory measures such as afforestation are recommended, but of what use are these to the individuals that suffer and die as a result of the project? So,

here, we have an instance of how inquiry into an issue is incomplete because the non-human animal is not taken into consideration.

While addressing issues related to exploitation, the social sciences have discussed the manner in which dominant knowledge bodies maintain power structures and contribute to the devalorisation of sub-altern groups. Foucault has ‘demonstrated how power is woven into all aspects of social and personal life, pervading [even the] social sciences’ (Kattakayam 2006). To Foucault, ‘all forms of “knowledge” and “truth” are merely the triumphant version of events that has succeeded in emerging from the perpetual struggle of ideas and ideologies that characterise our way of interacting’ (Downing 2008: 13).

Feminist theory (Ferguson 1994; Alcoff 2000) has also shown that women have been systematically marginalised by the intellectual community through a subtle process of deeming them unworthy of academic concern, by devaluing their cognitive patterns and modes of knowledge, and by keeping them away from the focus of theory in general – the process of epistemological exclusion, which to Arjun Appadurai (2000), is linked to social exclusion. It is typically dominant social groups that are involved in the development of mainstream knowledges that are portrayed as objective and universal, and the academic marginalisation of a particular group can usually be traced to the vested interests of the ‘knower’ (who seeks to protect his/her own interests). For example, the colonial project was justified and driven by dominant knowledge bodies like colonial anthropology and Orientalism.

The situation is similar with respect to human–non-human animal relations. The discursive formation of the social sciences is constructed by the dominant group (human beings, the ‘knowers’) and consequently excludes (deliberately or by omission) non-human animals (the potential ‘knowns’) from the focus of inquiry. This exclusion is achieved by means of a variety of arguments, some of which have been reviewed above. All these arguments, however, seem to be based on an *a priori* underlying assumption that non-human animals *do not matter as much* as humans, that their lives and well-being are not *as* important, except in an instrumental sense as conveyed by the idea of sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). This is evident in M. Radhakrishna’s examination of performing bear rescue, where she suggests that even while the efforts to protect animals are appreciated, the negative impacts these have on the human users of these animals mean that ‘public debate is necessary to discuss the lengths to which animal rights campaigns *can and should go*’ (2007: 4224; emphasis added).

Only the abovementioned assumption permits the otherwise inconsistent arguments that dismiss concern for non-human animals as western, elitist, casteist, non-secular, emotional, moralistic, and irrelevant in general. This assumption is so deeply entrenched in our collective consciousness that there is practically no discussion at all in the Indian social sciences of its origins or validity. What are the beliefs about non-human animals that give rise to this assumption? How valid are they, both in terms of facticity and as criteria for ethical and political decision-making? How can we understand these beliefs in the light of the general nature of the human- non-human animal relationship and what we have learnt from historical precedents?

Difference, Exploitation, and Exclusion

It is possible that the social sciences have ignored the concerns of non-human animals because they are widely perceived as being different from and, therefore, inferior to human beings and, in turn, not worthy of ethical consideration. As the animal ethics literature points out, humans and non-human animals are commonly seen as differing on the following axes: sentience; language; consciousness/self-awareness, intentionality and rationality; and moral agency (Armstrong and Botzler 2003; Garner 2004; Francione 2008).

Human-Animal Difference Revisited

The simplest definition of sentience is the ability to feel physical sensations such as pain and/or emotions such as fear (DeGrazia 2003). René Descartes held that animals are not sentient and are mere automatons, like machines (Rollin 2003a). There is now, however, evidence to suggest that non-human animals experience pain⁸ and suffering like humans (Armstrong and Botzler 2003; Garner 2004). Nevertheless, there are views that only 'higher' animals suffer (Bermond 2003) or that there are differences in levels of sentience and the less sentient the non-human, the fewer are our ethical obligations to them, because they are believed not to suffer 'as much' (Silverman 2008). This is used to justify the use of animals in scientific experiments (and also for other purposes such as food, clothing, accessories, and labour).

Pain in animals is studied by identifying physiological and behavioural responses/correlates to painful stimuli that are similar to those found in humans. For example, endorphins, serotonin, enkephalins, and endogenous opiates are secreted in both humans and animals in response to painful stimuli, and similar anaesthetics and analgesics are

effective for pain control in both (Rollin 2003a). The behavioural responses to pain are remarkably similar (for example, human and rat responses to electric shocks are alike) as are the morphological structures involved in pain mechanisms, especially in vertebrates and cephalopods (Varner 2003). Pain also has the same evolutionary function in humans and animals, and that is to avoid harm and death.

The arguments of those who deny animal suffering are based on the fact that, in humans, pain correlates are sometimes seen even in the absence of the experience of pain, like in the case of spinal cord damage or alexithymia (an emotional disorder) (Bermond 2003). It is also argued that similar neuroanatomical structures do not necessarily mean similar functions, as these *could* have altered during evolution (*ibid.*). The basic position of such arguments is that even though there are similarities in pain mechanisms, there is a possibility that these do *not* reflect similar emotional experiences. As B. Bermond opines, a rat walking over a hot plate (an electric stove) to get to food does not *necessarily* mean that it has experienced intense hunger; to him, such a conclusion is only an ‘anthropomorphic projection’ (*ibid.*: 84). Such arguments are based on exceptions/abnormalities in human experiences (not the rule), and do not by any means establish that non-human animals *do not* experience pain. As Bermond himself notes, pain can be studied directly only in humans, because only they can be asked whether they have feelings, and agnosticism about animal pain, as I shall argue below, is made possible because humans and animals cannot communicate adequately.

The measurement of pain and suffering has always been a difficult task as it is accepted that pain is subjective (Jennings *et al.* 2009). While there are several physiological and observational measures of pain, self-reports are ‘considered the gold standard of pain measurement’ (Strong *et al.* 2002: 126). This brings us to the question of how, given that we do not share a language with animals and, therefore, cannot elicit self-reports from them, it is possible to conclude that they suffer *less* or *do not* suffer, particularly when there is physiological and observational evidence that they *do* experience pain. By the same logic, we should be agnostic about pain experience in other humans (including infants) with whom we do not share a language. If we do believe that humans who do not share a language with us feel pain, it is because we project our own mental experiences onto them (Rollin 2003b). What grounds do we have to dismiss the same projection when it comes to non-human animals then?

Moving on to language, there is a lot of disagreement about how it distinguishes humans from non-human animals (Sorabji 1993; Singer and Kuhse 2002). There is one view that only humans have language,

whereas other views that see language as a system of signs hold that language is common to all animals, while syntax is what is peculiar to human beings (Sorabji 1993). Here again, a fundamental problem is the simple fact that humans do not share a mode of communication with other animal species that is adequate for the sharing of grammatical profundities. Therefore, the conclusion that they don't have language is very shaky indeed; all that can be said with certainty is that they don't have language or syntax as *humans* know it.

What about questions of consciousness, rationality, and intentionality? (Sorabji 1993; Singer and Kuhse 2002; Garner 2004). Consciousness is understood as the ability to be self-aware, form abstract concepts, plan ahead, and deal effectively with new situations, and there is a great deal of variation in views about consciousness in non-human animals (Dawkins 2003). With respect to rationality, the predominant view is that non-human animals do not possess reason and most 'rational' behaviours of non-human animals are dismissed on the grounds that they are mere physical adaptations, while the same/similar behaviour in humans is an 'act of reason' (Sorabji 1993). For example, a mother rat shifting her young ones to a safer location when the nest is disturbed is explained as merely biological and instinctual. It is held that only humans actually possess these qualities in a manner that is *more than biological* and, therefore, *superior* or of more *value*. But, despite the use of various measures to assess such mental qualities (Dawkins 2003; Griffin 2003), conclusions are ultimately based on the inability of non-human animals to *prove or report* to us that they do have these qualities (just like *we* cannot prove or report to *them* that *we* have these qualities). We know that most humans possess consciousness and rationality as we are able to share these ideas with each other. But, given that humans and non-human animals cannot share such concepts, it is unreasonable to conclude that they do not possess such traits.

Another related argument is that, since humans think about and anticipate pain, the future and death, their lives are of more value (Singer 2001). But this takes us back to the question, how can we be certain that non-human animals do not think? And even if they cannot, would the argument (Singer and Kuhse 2002) hold that since babies and mentally challenged people do not possess the capacity to anticipate, to use language, and to reason like other human beings, we are justified in using them as a 'resource'?

It is held that non-human animals are not moral agents and, therefore, are not worthy of moral consideration (Francione 2008). This argument not only ignores much evidence to the contrary (Bekoff 2007), but also forgets that it is widely accepted that we have moral obligations

to human beings who are not moral agents – for example, cognitively challenged people or infants. It also overlooks one of the grounds used to justify colonialism and slavery – the moral underdevelopment or ‘deceitful’ nature of the ‘Other’ races (Sahay 2007: para 2).

The exploitation of non-human animals is also justified on the grounds that since non-human animals are lesser beings on account of the differences described above, our abuse of them can be explained as being ‘natural’ rather than ‘social’ (Rollin 2003a). When human beings exploit other species, it is deemed to be a ‘natural’ (and morally excusable) phenomenon and, therefore, not a matter for social science critique. However, when humans exploit each other on account of caste, class, race, or gender differences, it becomes an act of injustice – the consequence of ‘social hierarchies’; a phenomenon that is worthy of entering the social science imagination. This line of reasoning is reminiscent of a time not too long ago when exploitation of non-white people was justified as ‘natural-normal-right’ because of ‘natural’ differences between races like the inferior intelligence and moral depravity of colonised peoples.

Lessons from History on Difference-based Exploitation

Insofar as it is just a listing of differences, no real problem exists. An inherently flawed leap of logic occurs when we use these perceived differences to make ethical judgments (Sorabji 1993; Alessio 2008). Difference, as feminist theory has argued, is not valid grounds for exploitation (Alcoff 2000).

Over the centuries, exploitative relationships have been legitimised by the construction of hierarchies based on perceived differences among the constituent groups (Alessio 2008). While such hierarchies manifest themselves in varied and intricate ways, what is often common to them⁹ is that they are constructed by dominant groups through a systematic process of devalorisation that assigns inferior value to aspects of real or imagined difference in the subaltern group, thus legitimising their control and utilisation as a ‘resource’. For example, the non-white races were deemed to be intellectually and morally inferior, dalits were supposed to have been ‘born’ lesser people, and non-human animals are supposed to lack the ability to reason considered ‘unique’ to human beings. White ethnic groups used the non-white races as a resource for physical labour, upper-caste groups used dalits as a resource for carrying out tasks that they did not want to do, and humans use non-human animals as a ‘natural resource’ to further human personal and economic well-being.

It is now recognised that criteria used to identify exclusionary difference are based on concepts created by the dominant group and are often not relevant to the devalorised group; and ‘those who start from a position of social control have the advantage of creating, defining, and applying the key concepts that ultimately determine [inclusion and exclusion]’ (*ibid.*: 72). In the context of intra-human differences, IQ (intelligence quotient) scores, for instance, ‘have no real meaning when used to compare groups [as they] ... are used to compare out-groups with the dominant in-group that created the IQ test’ (*ibid.*: 71). Similarly, rationality, language and so on, have no real meaning when used to make moral judgments about non-human animals as they are all concepts that are created by the dominant group – humans – and based on human standards (Wolch 1998).

I would like to suggest that the adherence of the social sciences to the wider societal assumption that non-human animals are inferior and not worthy of ethical consideration is linked to a conscious or unconscious subscription to the hierarchies outlined above. While the social sciences have often questioned the ‘objectivity’ of the natural sciences (Haraway 1991), in this case, they have easily accepted the shaky (and oft-questioned) verdict that animals are inferior beings because of the various differences discussed above.

What is disregarded is that not only have many of these assumptions been debunked (Garner 2004; Francione 2008) but also that most of these differences (such as language, rationality) are not relevant criteria for ethical judgment. What does matter is that there is much reason to believe that they suffer – for moral concern, as we know it, presupposes the ability to feel and suffer (Rollin 2003a). As Jeremy Bentham famously said, what is important is not whether ‘Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?’ (1789: 325)

Furthermore, it is important to remind ourselves again that mainstream knowledge bodies have historically been implicated in difference-based exploitation. Edward Said describes how Orientalism is a system of knowledge that portrayed

the Orient in terms of Western desires or Occidental notions of history, nature, culture, religion, society, man, rationality, etc., and represented it in terms of contrasting typologies within which inferior characters are attributed to the Orient: the vibrant Occidental man versus the sluggish Oriental, the scientific-rational Westerner versus the gullible-erratic Easterner, and the honest whites versus the deceitful non-whites...[and] [b]y setting up a binary of difference ... established a dominant and systematic discourse for describing, teaching and ruling the Orient’ (Sahay 2007: paras 2 and 3).

The parallels in the case of human–non-human animal relationships are evident. Therefore, it is important that the Indian social sciences are cognisant of this and deploy their critical-political role to its fullest.

A Case for Deeper Insight and Continuing Inclusiveness

Here is a question to the Indian social science academia: why are we so hesitant to engage with the morally questionable ways in which we relate to non-human animals? Is this because of some kind of basal fear that espousing such issues, that allowing them to enter the social science imagination, would threaten our known ways of life and our stable world? Or does it stem from the fear of being ridiculed as an elite ‘animal lover’? Why is the debate on the moral status of non-humans constantly delegitimised?

Including the Non-human Animal

The explanation that our attitudes and actions towards the non-human are a manifestation of the ‘survival of the fittest’ does not fit well with the fact that while we invoke nature’s ‘inherent bloodiness’ in justifying our exploitation of other species, we simultaneously set ourselves apart by claiming that the human is superior because he/she is *more* than biology and instinct. Furthermore, while it is impossible to deny the instinctual urge of the individual (human or non-human) to first protect the interests of the self (and immediate family), the use of the self-interest or self-defence arguments to legitimise institutional and large-scale exploitation of and violence towards other species is unjustifiable. In intra-human relationships too, self-defence is an acceptable argument in law for violence against the direct perpetrator of an attack against the individual. But large-scale violence and genocide is not (and should never be) considered legitimate.

R.D. Ryder notes that one common question is ‘Isn’t it natural to be speciesist?’ (1989: 7). Biology tells us the supposition that natural selection takes place because ‘it is good for the species’ is incorrect, and that ‘species as an entity does not answer to selection’ (Mayr 1997: 2092). Based on this, I would like to suggest that ‘species’ is a constructed concept specific to the human imagination, and that other animals do not behave so as to benefit the ‘species’. Their locus of concern is the individual (and immediate family). This is similar to the notion of human rights, where the concern is ultimately for the individual human. Therefore, it is *not* natural to be speciesist.

As has been discussed in the paper, it is difficult to conclude that non-human animals are inherently *inferior* and, even if we do so, this would only be even stronger reason to act towards them using high moral standards. It is precisely for voiceless groups like the cognitively challenged, children, and non-human animals that the critical-political role of the social science imagination becomes very significant.

It is possible to argue that there is no point in delving into these debates because the ways in which humans relate to non-human animals are too deeply entrenched to change. To this, it is Gandhi who provides an answer in *Hind Swaraj*. In the context of a discussion on how machinery has ‘impoverished India’, he says that the important thing is

to realize that machinery is bad. We shall then be able gradually to do away with it. Nature has not provided any way whereby we may reach a desired goal all of a sudden. If, instead of welcoming machinery as a boon, we should [*sic*] look upon it as an evil, it would ultimately go’ (Gandhi 1939: 93, see also 96-97).

Similarly, with respect to human–non-human relationships, the social sciences need to first recognise and challenge their ethically questionable nature, for without this first step, nothing can follow. A. Kothari offers a more direct argument, saying that while alternative, more benign ways of relating to other species may be referred to as ‘romantic’ or ‘impractical’, they are ‘no more impractical than trying to achieve universal human welfare through industrialisation of any kind’ (2009: 77).

History tells us that the field of social sciences has grown by expanding its boundaries to include previously excluded groups – from being a field that was focused on the interests of only the white male, to one that now includes the concerns of a much wider range of races, genders, and social groups. History also tells us that these groups were earlier excluded on the grounds that they were not of any significance to this field, just like how it is now held that non-human animals are not a relevant or legitimate subject of social science inquiry and politics. As A. Clarke notes, ‘power operates to create silences and gaps, and the sins of omission in ... the social sciences ... have been profound’ (2005: 76). The capacity to be sensitive to precedents and patterns, and engage with them in early stages, is extremely crucial for the social sciences. With respect to the human–non-human relationship, it is very clear that certain themes that have been identified in discourses around other forms of exploitation are repeating. For instance, the ease with which we use the term ‘animal lover’ to dismiss arguments that challenge human superiority and animal exploitation is, in a sense, an outright denial of the civil liberties discourse and the struggles that were undergone to shed the label ‘nigger

lover'. Therefore, a truly self-reflexive and self-critical discipline would be cautious when it comes to dismissing injustice in human–non-human relationships – and consequently making the non-human animal 'abuseable' and 'killable' (Haraway 2008).

An Empathetic Imagination

By examining and critically deconstructing some common arguments related to human–non-human animal difference and the politics of knowledge, this paper has sought to establish that the Indian social sciences are not justified in ignoring and/or excluding non-human beings as subjects of concern. In so doing, it points to the need for Indian social science to recognise the often arbitrary (and yet deeply political) nature of its boundaries. While the paper has non-human animals as its analytical focus, the overall arguments are relevant to social science boundaries in general and the processes of inclusion/exclusion that they are implicated in. The example of non-human animals just goes to show how easily the social sciences can overlook, exclude, and dismiss without being aware of the inconsistencies in, lack of foundation for, and ethical problems with such positions.

While the paper dwelt on non-human animals, a re-specification of imaginative limits to include certain groups and not others, would be at cross purposes with the more fundamental point this paper seeks to make. And that is the need for the social sciences to be self-reflexive and critically self-aware, and be constantly engaged in a process of examining orthodoxies and boundaries that perpetuate its involvement in the reproduction of exploitative relationships. The role of the social science imagination becomes crucial where perceived differences are the greatest, and when exploitation is legitimised on such bases. It is my contention that the exclusionary and hegemonic impacts of such differences are the most severe when the degree of communication between the differing groups is minimal, as we saw in the discussions about reason, sentience, language, and the charge of elitism in preceding sections of the paper. And it is when communication, and consequently participation, is a limiting factor that a sensitive, empathetic imagination has a valuable part to play in questioning exclusionary boundaries. Therefore, for Indian social science to be the progressive field it seeks to be, it should guard against complacency about the rightness of its boundaries, and must heed Mills' call for a self-aware imagination that provides the space for multiple perspectives – human and non-human; Self and Other; Us and Them.¹⁰

Notes

1. I thank Sundar Sarukkai for pointing this out to me.
2. I use the term non-human animals to emphasise that the human is a subset of 'animal'.
3. Issues missed: 1960 Vol. 9 (1); 1988 Vol. 37.
4. Issues missed: 2000 Vol. 2 (1); 2003 Vol.5 (2).
5. I must clarify here that I am not defending the manner in which conservation is currently practised in India; I am only trying to point to the need to go beyond existing polarisations in the debate.
6. There may be cases in which disempowered people from different areas gather to present a united front on an issue even if the issue at hand does not affect all of them immediately; but even in such cases, it is the knowledge that they could face (or have faced or are facing) a similar threat that spurs such participation.
7. These bans augment animal suffering because when the cattle outlive their 'productive' lives, they are transported in the most deplorable conditions to states where such slaughter is allowed.
8. As Garner points out, 'awareness of pain is functional for survival since animals can take steps to avoid it. It makes evolutionary sense, therefore, to impute sentience to human and non-human animals, whereas it does not for plants who do not have the capacity to escape from harm' (2004:11-12).
9. Of course, power structures and hierarchies without any underlying construction of difference do exist, say, for instance, hierarchies that are imposed by brute force.
10. The idea for this paper emerged during the Summer School for Philosophy (2007) organised by the Centre for Philosophy, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer, N. Jayaram, Sundar Sarukkai, Rajesh Kasturirangan, Vijay K. Nagaraj, and Geoffrey Tan for their feedback.

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