

Human, Horse, Habitat: A Posthumanist Exploration of Animal Labour in the Urbanisation of Delhi

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Abstract

This article explores the horse's silent but salient role in Delhi's urbanisation, thereby reimagining human-animal relationships in the city. Horses have been integral to the urban economies of the Global South by providing valuable labour in the informal construction industry. Their activities shape the neighbourhood's development and the city's look. Humans and horses have a history of co-habitation and co-evolution, which resonates with Haraway's concept of companion species, mainly because the communities raising and working with the horses have been in the same business for generations. However, these horses in the construction industry are ignored in the planning process. Their work is absent from the livestock census, but their presence in the city is prominent. This allows us to question our imagination of the city, which is not just anthropocentric and capitalistic, based on design and planning; instead, there is an intricate interplay between humans and non-human forces that results in shaping the urban environment. Urban Political Ecology acts as a posthumanist approach that decenters anthropocentrism and emphasises incorporating the role of 'non-human' elements like plants and animals within the urban landscape to understand it better

Keywords: Human, Horse, Habitat, A Posthumanist Exploration, Animal Labour

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Introduction

Posthumanism challenges the assumptions that humans are superior to all other life forms. Rather than seeing humans as independent agents acting on the world, posthumanist scholars emphasise entanglement and enmeshment, the idea that humans are inseparably embedded within networks of nonhuman life, technologies, materials, and ecosystems. From this perspective, human-animal relations are not secondary concerns or moral side issues; they are central to how we think about life in a shared world. Posthumanist approaches, in general, question the divisions between human and non-human, as well as culture and nature, by noting how enmeshed each category is. They have a history of co-development and co-existence. The horse has been a co-inhabitant of society since before the Common Era. The role of these non-humans in the historic transformation of the cities is quite evident; however, their current roles as still contributing members to urbanisation are ignored.

Humans socially construct and integrate animals into society based on their utilitarian value. The domestication of animals, for instance, with animal assistance in agriculture, hunting and herding, transportation, as well as the use of animals as food, led to the development of human civilisation.

Coming to horses, the claims generally aren't that these equines have been providing the most labour, but that they have been part of much of the significant work in human societies. Some archaeologists do believe that horses have contributed more than any other animal towards human civilisation (DeMello 2021). Horses were originally hunted for food, then around five thousand years ago, they were used in pulling ploughs, becoming the 'first true beast of burden'. Two thousand years later, horse riding developed and soon horses became more significant to humans with travelling, warfare, trade, work, and even entertainment and sports. Their significance only declined in the early nineteenth century with the advent of the internal combustion engine. However, they remain essential

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to human societies (DeMello 202). The utilitarian conceptualisation of the horse creates a beast of burden for human ‘ends.’ Horses are the ‘means’, the tools for the development of human society (Birke and Thompson 2017).

Horses can be conceptualised in many ways, to begin with: livestock (culturally, with sheep, cattle, etc), lovestock (as pets), and lifestock (‘they enable/ require a particular lifestyle’) (Birke and Thompson 2017). For instance, in the UK, horses are considered a ‘significant part of the rural economy and as companion animals’ by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. In Australia,

the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy has six different animal categories, five of which accommodate horses depending on their use-value to humans: companion animals; livestock and production animals; animals in the wild; animals in research and training; and animals used in sport, recreation, work and display. (Birke and Thompson 2017)

Similarly, India’s Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying, in its 20th Livestock Census-2019: All India Report by the Department of Animal Husbandry & Dairying (Animal Husbandry Statistic Division), consider horses and other equids as livestock and defines livestock as “domesticated animals mainly contributing income to farmers” (“20th Livestock Census” 2019).

The 20th Census report reveals that Mithun, yaks, horses, ponies, mules, donkeys and camels only contribute 0.23% of the total livestock. The report provides basic data like, “in 2019, the total horses and ponies population is 3.4 lakhs, decreased by 45.2%, mules population is 8400, decreased by 57.1% and the donkeys’ population is 1.2 lakhs, decreased by 61.2% over previous Census” (“20th Livestock Census - 2019 All India Report” 2019). The report only considers horses as working animals in the tourism and horse-racing industry; no data for mules or donkeys is available regarding the work they provide in construction or the military. The absence of these animals’ work is evident in the 20th Livestock Census-2019 All India Report, which presents data on various

livestock, including horses, ponies, mules, and donkeys. “The report also did not include the current population of Delhi as they could not complete the Census operation” (“20th Livestock Census - 2019 All India Report” 2019), provided this information, there are a total of 2694 horses and ponies, 1087 mules and donkeys in both urban and rural Delhi according to the 19th Livestock Census - 2012. According to a 2025 release by the Press Information Bureau, the 21st Livestock Census, ‘the enumeration work is ongoing’. Hence, current data for Delhi and the equine in question is not available yet.

In urban areas, animals could be found in our homes as pets, in scientific laboratories, in zoos, or as ‘out of place’, even in the wild areas of the city. However, that’s not the extent, there are meat shops that keep live animals, and there are many meat factories, dairy farms and fur farms at the fringes of the city. Animals are also found in cultural symbols and linguistic metaphors; in myths, legends, folktales, and even as totem animals. They are found in systems of law, in the military and the police. In circuses, sports, entertainment and even the virtual world, one can find animals (DeMello 2021). Animals are also at work, as this paper is trying to achieve.

In many cities of the global south, infrastructural development in many unplanned neighbourhoods occurs without prior planning, almost impromptu in its wake, focusing on independent and personal projects that often ignore the climate and ecological crisis and fail to meet energy efficiency criteria (Imam and Banerjee 2016), without hazard mitigation and disaster planning, and even without any regard to the land-use patterns (Jon 2020) has led to the formation of concrete jungles, and in the context of Delhi, unauthorised colonies, and slums. In this scenario, equids (horses, donkeys, and mules) often come into play as working animals for transporting construction materials through the narrow lanes of these neighbourhoods. In these neighbourhoods, the contribution of working animals becomes crucial in the informal construction activities that shape the neighbourhood’s development. Despite their historical and contemporary contributions to the development and maintenance of urban life, especially in cities of the Global South,

working horses, mules, and donkeys are rendered invisible within official records, planning frameworks, and imaginaries of modernity. Posthumanism invites us to rethink this erasure by foregrounding multispecies entanglements and challenging assumptions about who or what belongs in the city.

The human, the horse and the habitat

The unique experience of Delhi as a global city with a deep-rooted, culture-rich history, ever-evolving in a palimpsest of urban architecture, society, and people, the urban animal is often neglected in urban life. Since medium-to-large animals do not fit into the mould of an urban area, the image of a ‘smart’ and ‘modern’ city (Ramaswamy 1983). Working animals such as mules, horses, and donkeys have been integral to urban economies, providing valuable labour in the construction industry and transporting goods and people. Despite their contribution, working animals are often overlooked and excluded from urban planning and policies because they are deemed temporary and irrelevant to the future of building cities. The assumption that there would be no need for them in the future of building cities keeps them excluded from the policies. We are not individualistic or isolated; our actions depend on our environment and affect the environment. The city is not just based on design, capital and planning; instead, an intricate interplay between humans and non-human forces shapes urban environments (Barua 2023). It is essential to remember that “cities are fully functioning ecosystems, and humans are not their only citizens” (Baggaley 2015) to understand the ecosystem’s interconnectedness and the need for inclusive policies. In Delhi, the presence of working horses in the city can be read as a site of negotiation over what kinds of animal practices are considered legitimate or ‘out of place’ in urban space, reflecting more profound anxieties about modernity, class, and the proper order of the city. Hence, it becomes clear that the marginalisation of equids in contemporary urban discourse reflects broader posthumanist concerns about visibility, value, and relationality.

The anthropocentric approach fails to recognise the interconnectedness of the ecosystem and the role of working animals in urban environments. Lefebvre (1970) argues that urbanisation will become ubiquitous and society will become completely urbanised. The ideas and infrastructure will spread to the remotest locations (Gandy 2014). Market forces and technocratic planning will drive cities; capitalism will transform production, consumption, and social relations, leading to complete planetary urbanisation. However, this approach only provides nuance for a specific type of urbanisation that excludes many factors, such as informality, post-colonial cities, non-human inhabitants, etc. From an urban political ecology perspective, Gandy (2022) emphasises incorporating the role of ‘non-human’ elements like plants, animals and other living things within the urban landscape in a multi-perspectival approach. Urban political ecology challenges the idea of anthropocentrism and promotes a more holistic understanding of cities as complex ecosystems where humans and non-humans are interconnected. Employing an urban political ecology approach, this study could comment on environmental justice, urban metabolism and sustainable urban development, keeping the working animal at the centre. Non-humans in urban areas must be further analysed to see if they support and contribute to society and the economy.

Working with horses is a hereditary occupation. Most labourers there started accompanying their fathers to work at a very young age. Horses are primarily used to transport construction materials in the city. Usually, this work begins with a small truck or tempo unloading material like bricks, gravel or sand on the main road. The horse keepers are contacted by building contractors to help transport materials. Four or five labourers and their horses load the materials on the horses’ backs and take them through narrow lanes to the construction site. This takes a couple of rounds. However, the payment depends on the amount of material unloaded by the small trucks, ranging from eight hundred to two thousand rupees, divided amongst the four or five labourers, leaving them with five or six hundred rupees at the end of the day. The labourers take care of the horses

very seriously, like their children. Though the state allows animals to work for not more than eight hours, they ensure the horses only work four hours with proper care at the end of the day. They dust and comb them, massage them, and ensure they eat the fodder and drink plenty of water. The fodder per day per horse costs around two hundred rupees. So, each labourer only makes four or five hundred rupees. The labourers express the problems they face as the city keeps growing. They remember when the neighbourhood had more green spaces; the horses also felt more at ease. They used to let the horses graze near the sand-deposited hill near the Yamuna River and even let them graze in the forest, which is now the neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh.

A posthumanist exploration of the human-animal relationship in the urban

The implicit assumption that the modern city is only a space for human habitation, constructed for and by humanity alone, has been reassessed, readdressed and reimagined (Franklin 2017). During the first half of the twentieth century, geographers only focused on the spatial distribution of animals in their natural settings, which could be mapped and minimally theorised. Animals or any other nonhuman element, for that matter, within the border context of the urban and nature-society relations were absent (Wolch 2002). Moreover, this kind of study is known as Zoögeography (Wolch 2002). However, in the mid-twentieth century, new approaches to studying animals arose, where topics of “prehistory of animal domestication, cultural and economic roles of animals in agrarian societies, and environmental changes attendant upon agriculture and livestock-based lifeways” (Price and Lewis 1993; Wolch 2002) led to questioning and emphasising animal agency rather than treating them as cultural artefacts. Towards the end of the twentieth century, “genetic engineering, cloning and xenotransplantation” put animals at the centre stage vis-à-vis questions of ethics and agency, and the boundaries between humans, animals and machines were questioned extensively (Wolch 2002). Moreover, the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed the actual negative repercussions of

the Anthropocene in the urban. The technological turn and urbanisation pushed aside many indigenous practices as relics of the past, and as this article has emphasised, led them to be thought of as in a transitional phase, which they are not. This led to scholars writing about how “indigenous societies and rural communities sustained a close connection with nature and the non-human world” and how that informs the “mutual dependences and co-evolution of living beings” (Jon 2020).

A human-animal relationship approach is employed to understand the relationship between horses, the community associated with them and their work. The research highlights the interdependency between people and horses. As the field visit revealed, the changing city has impacted the work of the horse keepers and the horses themselves. From the shrinking open spaces for the horses to graze to the shrinking space for them to stay has increased the fodder cost, which leaves the labourers with meager wages. The open stable on the busy road, with noise, light, and dust pollution, leads to uneasiness in the horses’ lives. The location of this informal work also reveals the spaces of cultivated animals. The horses’ owners care deeply for their animals and view them beyond their commodified nature. Horses are not just tools for economic output but also essential to the livelihoods of those who rely on them. The presence of horses in cities like Delhi shows a historical presence of labouring communities, and the relationship extends to how it shapes ecological and cultural dimensions, demonstrating how non-human actors contribute to shaping both urban space and social relations. Barua (2023) focuses on the non-humans in capitalism-driven urbanising cities and how the contribution of animals, such as the working horses in the nineteenth century, is recognised. Working animals such as equids and bovines are part of urban economies, providing labour in various industries like transportation, agriculture and dairy. Aside from working and domesticated animals, Barua emphasises commensal and feral animals, equally modifying urban spaces and creating diverse urban relationships.

Donna Haraway (2008) proposes the concept of ‘companion species.’ The animals she refers to are pets and any species with a long history of co-evolution and co-habitation with humans. For Haraway, relationships with animals are not clean, hierarchical, or easily mapped; they are messy, relational, and situated. In her view, urban animals are not just shaped by the city; they also shape it. They help us reimagine ethics not as a set of universal principles but as a practice of response-ability, the ability and obligation to respond meaningfully and attentively to others. Ethics, in this framework, is not about drawing lines between those who matter and those who do not, but about learning to live well within ongoing relationships of dependency and care. She challenges the idea of humans being superior to other animals and pushes for a more inclusive and multi-species understanding of the world by acknowledging our entanglement with other species. So this concept informs the relationship between humans and horses in the context of labour and urban infrastructure, and the idea of ‘making kin’ in the Anthropocene is quite prominent in this context. It is not even about making kin; they are kin. The research reveals itself as a form of kinship between humans and horses, where both are seen as vital to the survival and development of urban environments, interdependent and reflecting the theme of a shared existence in the Anthropocene. This idea extends through what David Harvey talks about, or perhaps how we can relate it to Haraway’s concept. Harvey (2014) uses the concept of ‘palimpsest’ to illustrate the results of the processes of urbanisation that characterise a city with the coexistence of many layers that originated at different times and were superimposed, one upon the other. These communities have existed through generations, and the content of what they transport with the horses might have changed, but the work has not. Haraway and Harvey both come in as more classical in their theorisation of the human-animal relationship and the transformation of the city.

The urban form can emerge through the interactions, associations and economic and political consequences of human and nonhuman forces. Even Marx’s reading from a minor key reveals his indirect mentions of ‘lively potentials’, for instance, animals or

material, and how production is not just a human activity; it incorporates more-than-human processes that help coproduction. Barua's conceptualisation of the animal is based on the fact that in an urbanising city, the contribution of animals, such as the working horse in the nineteenth century, is recognised. Working animals such as equids and bovines have been constitutive of urban economies, providing valuable labour in various industries like transportation, agriculture, and dairy, and they have been part of modifying urban spaces and creating diverse urban relationships. This informs that the urban form can emerge through human and nonhuman forces' interactions, associations, and even economic and political consequences. In popular urban Studies discourse, the urban is imagined through a planetary urbanism approach, situating anthropocentrism and capitalism at the centre. With this approach, the role of a horse would always remain invisible. However, employing a posthumanist approach like urban political ecology, for instance in urban planning, would emphasise the role of 'non-human' elements like plants and animals within the urban landscape (Gandy 2022).

Conclusion

Some practical ways in which horses can be acknowledged as working animals in urban areas and contributors to urban development would start with updating the Livestock Census itself, which would be an inclusive way to account for their work, other than just for tourism and horse racing. The notion of animals being 'out of place' is common discourse, especially in urban areas, because cities are not planned to keep animals in mind. Many early planners who dreamt and planned utopias did not incorporate many elements of society, including animals and even people (Buller 2014). To counter this, interdisciplinary planning teams, including ecologists and animal welfare experts, should ensure that animal needs are addressed throughout the urban planning cycle. Involving the horse-keeping communities in the co-design and management of policies affecting their livelihoods and animal welfare would ensure their traditional knowledge

and needs are respected. The city's infrastructure should be able to accommodate these animals with safe stabling areas and shelters, green spaces for grazing, and access to clean water and fodder, especially in dense urban areas where grazing is not possible. Some existing welfare protocols like the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, and the Prevention of Cruelty to Draught Animals Rules, 1965, could be extended to urban construction contexts and not just for rural or hilly regions; along with mandatory registration of all working horses with local authorities, including regular veterinary health checks, tagging, and monitoring for diseases such as glanders and equine influenza. Updating relevant laws to include urban working animals in definitions of labourers and workers would ensure their protection under labour and welfare statutes. And, lastly, to promote the value and contributions of working horses in urban development to reduce stigma and foster respect for multispecies urban communities.

Academic scholarship offers another avenue to understand their contributions, for instance, through the posthumanist ontologies of Deleuze, Guattari, Latour, Haraway, etc. came after the environmental and ecological concerns of the 1970s-1990s and Indigenous and post-colonial studies (Rose et al.; Benson; Franklin). The Anthropocene finally witnesses a new era incorporating nature rather than seeing it as a background in our daily lives. This is important because it reveals a broader—though not yet holistic—perspective, which is a crucial starting point (Jon). Planning for a few years has called for an inclusive approach where design accommodates ‘more-than-human attachments and other-than-human interests’ (Metzger). A posthumanist planning approach accounts for the ‘historicity of the place’ and a holistic and systematic approach to the area's development (Jon).

From a posthumanist approach of urban political ecology, cities are viewed holistically, teeming with life forms, technologies, and materialities, among other niches that comprise diverse more-than-human politics, where matters beyond the humanist concerns can be addressed (Franklin). The intricate interplay between human and non-

human forces shapes urban environments and challenges the anthropocentric and capitalist narratives of urbanisation. Looking at horses' work in Delhi informs us that these animals are not merely transitional relics of the past but active agents shaping the spatial and economic dynamics of the city. Though often overlooked in formal urban discourse, their work reflects the close relationship between humans and animals, revealing a layered urban landscape shaped by multispecies interactions. The findings suggest that horses and their keepers are not marginal but fundamental to the informal economies sustaining Delhi's rapidly urbanising neighbourhoods. The presence of these working animals in urban settings expose the limitations of conventional planning that fail to accommodate the non-human elements shaping urban ecosystems. From an urban political ecology perspective, the study advocates for a multi-perspectival approach to urban planning that acknowledges the contributions of working animals and the broader ecosystem to urban life. This approach fosters inclusive and sustainable urban development, recognising that cities are co-produced by humans and non-humans alike. Moreover, it calls for reevaluating policies that marginalise working animals, urging a shift toward frameworks that integrate their presence and labour into urban governance. Introducing Anthropocene and more-than-human ecology to urban theory and planning theory opens up the city-nature debate. Initially, planning in cities is anthropocentric and capitalistic (Barua), a very "human-exceptionalist view of the world" (Jon 2020); however, the post-humanist approach incorporates, inclusively and ethically, the larger natural aspects of the city, for instance, the plants and animals. Gandy talks about a multiperspective and holistic approach to better understanding and planning the city.

There is plenty of scholarship regarding the horse, and to contribute to that, I endeavoured to research this human-horse relationship in the urban, especially in a global south city like Delhi. Since horses or other equids like mules and donkeys are quite literally part of building the city, demonstrating, through the lens of urban political ecology as a posthumanist approach to understanding cities that cities are a construct of

human and nonhuman forces and relations in its most primal forms, not only the fact that animals do exist along humans in the urban but also constructing it as well. Urban political ecology concerns how political, economic, and ecological forces interact within cities. Traditionally, urban studies have treated animals as marginal, as pests to be removed, pets to be controlled, or as relics of a rural past. However, posthumanist urban political ecology refuses to see animals as mere background to human-centred urban life. It recognises that animals are co-participants in the making of the city, considering the horses that transport bricks through Delhi's informal settlements or the street dogs that are befriended by people living in slums that act as guard dogs to prevent them from being subjects of petty crimes and threats. These animals are not just surviving in cities but shaping the urban environment through their labour, presence, and interactions. In recognising this, posthumanist thought shifts the focus from human mastery over urban nature to multispecies cohabitation.

To conclude, posthumanism provides powerful tools for rethinking our relationships with animals in urban contexts. It questions the human-centred assumptions that continue to shape urban planning, governance, and theory. In doing so, it transforms the city from a site of human progress into a complex ecological space of co-creation. Posthumanist urban political ecology invites us to imagine more inclusive and just urban futures—futures in which we no longer see ourselves as separate from or above the animal others who share our streets, homes, and infrastructures. Haraway reminds us that the challenge is not to escape these entanglements but to stay with the trouble and remain accountable to the complex, fragile, and co-constituted worlds we inhabit.

Author Bio

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