

THE COW HERSELF HAS CHANGED: BOVINE POLITICS AND MATERIALITY IN INDIA'S CENTRAL HIMALAYAS



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In 2007, the government of Uttarakhand, a state in India's Central Himalayan region, enacted a law that banned cow slaughter, the possession of beef, and the transportation of cattle across state lines. In this talk, I will trace how contemporary projects of cow-protection are frustrated by their location in incommensurate worlds where the undifferentiated and abstract metaphor of the cow mother of the Hindu nation does not sit easily alongside the distinct and lively materiality of the actual cows it represents. I explore how state efforts to encourage farmers to raise Jersey cows as part of a dairy farming program have radically altered the bovine landscape of this region, leading villagers to reflect on how these new cows are different from the pahari (mountain) cows they were more familiar with in the past. Drawing on their intimate knowledge and experience of the distinctive temperament, tendencies and materiality of the different cows that they live with and care for, villagers suggest that Jersey cows are not as ritually powerful as pahari cows and are, therefore, potentially killable. The vital and meaningful corporeality of individual cows, I thus argue, conditions and constrains attempts by religious nationalists to build an imagined nation around a homogeneous bovine symbol.

TUESDAY
MAY 2ND, 2017
12:00 - 1:20 PM
BUILDING 50, 51A