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Birds on Film: Synanthropic Species and the Globalised Indian Cinema

Madhumita Lahiri
mlahiri@umich.edu

This essay examines the role of synanthropic bird species –that is, bird species which thrive in human environments – in globally successful Indian cinema. I focus on the acclaimed 2022 film *All That Breathes* (dir. Shaunak Sen), which won a battery of film festival prizes as well as widespread international distribution. Celebrated for its innovations in the genre of nature documentary, *All That Breathes* centers on two brothers in India who feed and rehabilitate black kites. At a formal level, *All That Breathes* uses a remarkably slow tempo and an uncanny soundtrack, developing a cinematography of bird portraits, gazes, and reflections. Withholding the more familiar conventions of bird photography, such as stunning close-ups of flying raptors, the film never leaves the ground. Instead, through long takes that slowly shift perspective and focus, the film highlights the elaborate species interdependence of India’s capital city as well as its ongoing ecological catastrophe. We see birds’ eyes viewing; we do not see bird’s-eye views.

All That Breathes’ repeated scenes of bird-feeding and bird-rehabilitation form a powerful intervention into existing Indian (and global) discourses around humans’ care for birds. I juxtapose this celebrated art film with the central bird-feeding scenes in the iconic Bollywood film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (“The Brave-Hearted will Take Home the Bride,” or *DDLJ*, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995). For generations of Indian viewers, *DDLJ* defined what it meant to be Indian in a globalizing framework: the film moved from Indians in London to Indians in Punjab, affirming the centrality of family to a particularly hegemonic notion of Indianness that circulated via the film industry. *DDLJ* famously opened with a scene of pigeon-feeding in England, which sets up the film’s key crisis of identity: does an Indian in London become British, or remain Indian, or neither one? These

questions are resolved in a later scene of pigeon-feeding, as well as pigeon rehabilitation, in India, and the film culminates in the happy compatibility of companionate and arranged marriage practices that have come to define hegemonic ideas of globalized Indian patriarchy: what Patricia Uberoi has termed the “arranged love marriage,” where individual choice and patriarchal authority are found perfectly compatible. Both *DDLJ* and *All that Breathes* narrate stories of human belonging through religiously coded practices of bird-feeding, and both films rely upon global circuits of film distribution and consumption for their existence. In addition, both films use strategic subtitling of their Hindi-Urdu dialogue to keep the birds at their center somewhat ambiguous. In *DDLJ*, this operates through the selective translation of *kabutar* as both “pigeon” and “dove.” The word does correspond to both English terms, and to *Columba livia*, and while ornithologists seem to understand “pigeon” and “dove” as effectively interchangeable, many English speakers would imagine an obvious chromatic difference between the two. In *All That Breathes*, the birds at the center are *Milvus migrans govinda*, known as *cheel* in Hindi-Urdu and as black kites in English. Kite in English has multiple, and often negative, meanings; *cheel* does not.

Humanities scholarship on birds in (Indian) cities tends to assume that the humans are the problem, and the birds are victim-survivors, adapting as best they can. This often surfaces in comments so brief as to signal the indication of a shared common sense: for instance, in the claim that “The deterioration of [Delhi’s] air has made respiration a shared burden across species.”ⁱ Yet the proliferation of birds within India’s cities can itself pose a kind of respiratory crisis, at least for humans. The city of Mumbai has shown an increase in hypersensitivity pneumonitis, many cases of which can be attributed to “pigeon lung,” also called “bird fancier’s lung,” triggered by prolonged exposure to bird droppings and allergens. The disease is incurable, and eventually fatal, especially among children.ⁱⁱ For the human inhabitants of Mumbai, and perhaps of other cities, birds are part of the environmental catastrophe.ⁱⁱⁱ The air in an Indian megacity is not good for humans, nor is it

good for birds – and the polluters of the air, in this case, are both the humans and the birds. I turn to *DDLJ*'s centering of pigeon-feeding and pigeon-rehabilitation to examine this nexus between the pigeon and the human in India, considering how pigeons complicate easy distinctions between the urban and the rural.

Kites do not share this association with disease in humans, and, unlike pigeons, they seem to fulfill an urgent ecological role: in Delhi, they “remove more than 3900 tons of organic waste per year.”^{iv} Whereas scholarship on urban birds often debates whether these birds are adapting to their environments or merely exploiting their existing range of plasticity, kites in Delhi have adapted to their megacity. Delhi now a key component of their niche, defined in ecology as the match between a species and its specific ecological conditions, as much as it is for Delhi's millions of human residents. As the biologist Nishant Kumar and his colleagues explain,

for many urban species, the attraction to an extreme anthropogenic ecosystem is based on the exploitation of human provision itself rather than resilience to its actions, and for some synanthropic species this may derive from millennia of co-existence with man, better seen as an integral portion of their niche as well as a beneficiary of ecosystem services^v

Kites and humans in Delhi can be understood as part of a “coupled-system,” for “kite behaviour was keenly adjusted to humans, tolerating them at close range when feeding but attacking them when provoked, while humans equally responded to kite behaviour, encouraging their ecosystem service function and avoiding them without retaliation when attacked.”^{vi} The kite's role as both a facultative scavenger (that is, opportunistic, rather than obligate) and an opportunistic predator led to its widespread stigmatization, persecution, and effective extinction in England, Ireland, and Scotland. In India, its garbage-eating ways have led to widespread tolerance, and even gratitude. I turn to *All That Breathes*' centering of kite-feeding and kite-rehabilitation to consider what kite-human relations can teach us about urban hierarchy, stigma, and stratification, for the kites' reliance on specifically Muslim feeding practices leads them to inhabit the city in religiously specific ways. In

a city that increasingly discriminates against its Muslim inhabitants, the kites seek out Muslim neighborhoods, integrating in ecological terms what humans would keep segregated.

I have approached both kites and pigeons through a somewhat minor term in ecology and biology: the synanthropic. The synanthropic species is as simple as its name: in Richard F. Johnston's influential definition, it is "the subset of a biotic community that can cohabit with humans."^{vii} The category excludes, by definition, all domesticated animals, instead including species like tapeworms, lice, and weeds, which "are particularly associated with humans and places of human habitation."^{viii} These species "exhibit expanded ranges and/or increased populations as a result of anthropogenic activities."^{ix} As these examples suggest, many synanthropes are widely despised as parasites and pests – yet synanthropic bird species, such as pigeons and kites, are generally welcomed, or at least tolerated. Pigeons and kites are not only synanthropic but also, at least in some regions, synurbic, with a "preferential urban association" manifest in "higher densities in urban compared to rural areas."^x Studies of synurbic species have focused heavily on birds who have adapted to their urban environments: blackbirds, wood pigeons, and magpies in Poland; mockingbirds, white-winged doves, house finches, chimney swifts, and house wrens in the USA; and thrushes, blackbirds, and robins (*Turdus* spp.) in England.^{xi} The scholarship on South Africa's synurbic birds is limited, but the category would include hadedas and sparrows. Mammals also adapt: think of brown rats, house mice, European foxes, European badgers, striped field mice, stone martens – and so do bugs, like dust mites, bed bugs, invasive mosquitoes, sand flies.^{xii}

A common choice to describe these animals is the category of the "commensal": the sharing of food. Yet commensality as it has been discussed in the humanities is heavily loaded with positive connotations: Bénédicte Boisseron, for instance, defines it as "a class of relationship in which two organisms mutually benefit without adversely affecting each other."^{xiii} As the pigeon-feeding ban and its protests in Mumbai shows, assessing benefit and harm is not a simple matter: pigeon-feeding is

understood as religiously beneficial by its practitioners, even as it is termed dangerous by its opponents. The commensality of kites is more conceivable, given the sanitary services they provide in Delhi's ecosystem, and yet, they depend on Delhi's insanitation. When Delhi has efficient and sanitary waste disposal, thousands of kites will starve. When a food-sharing animal is considered harmful, it is termed not commensal but parasitic. When a commensal animal is disliked, it is termed a pest.

Birds form an unusually powerful node in the confusions between commensality and parasitism. While pigeons have been described as flying rats,^{xiv} they are also widely fed, in India as elsewhere. Even in the US, where bans on pigeon-feeding have not drawn the violent protests such restrictions have received in India, explicitly anti-pigeon activities such as pigeon-shooting have drawn considerable protest.^{xv} Similarly, while kites were described in *Collins' Birds of India* (London, 1980) as "everywhere parasitic on man,"^{xvi} and while kites have been extensively killed and persecuted in England, researchers were unable to find "any cases of persecution of kites in Delhi."^{xvii} Unlike European kites, who are frequently afraid of humans, Delhi's kites show no fear. Even humans who had been attacked by kites in Delhi expressed positive attitudes about the birds, sympathizing with the kites both for their protective impulses towards their offspring and for their existence within a human-degraded habitat, and tying these views to their Hindu or Islamic religious beliefs.^{xviii} I center birds to highlight the difficulty of distinguishing commensality, with its dynamic of the gift, from parasitism. The geographer Maan Barua uses a simple definition of commensality – "to be messmates at a common table" – yet this one resembles Michel Serres' minimalist definition of parasitism: "To parasite means to eat next to," and his development of the parasitic relation "as that of guest to host."^{xix} Given the centrality of restrictions on commensality in social stratification (as for instance in caste), as well as the importance of parasitism in theories of hospitality (via Serres and Jacques Derrida), the complexity that birds pose to the commensal-parasitic distinction may

unpack other confusions in both human and other-than-human relations. India is also the home of the Cockroach Janata Party, a youth-centered political movement founded in May 2026 after a comment by Surya Kant, the current Chief Justice of India, that “there are already parasites in society”:

Have you seen them? There are youngsters like cockroaches. They don’t get any employment. They don’t have any place in profession. Some of them become media, some of them become social media, some of them become RTI [Right to Information] activists, some of them become another activist, and they start attacking everyone.^{xx}

Cockroaches, only some species of which are synanthropic, are hardy and gregarious animals that can even be kept as pets.

Whereas the governance of other-than-animal life in Europe and the US seems firmly biopolitical, Barua has argued that institutional responses Indian cities relies upon a “rule by aesthetics” and “an aesthetic politics,” rather than a biopolitics.^{xxi} This has implications for theories of animal rights, for animals are global but animal-human relations can be highly culturally specific. For instance, Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka’s 2011 theory of animal rights, *Zoopolis*, situates birds within the category of “the non-domesticated liminal animals who live among us,” for whom “a form of denizenship is the appropriate status.”^{xxii} Their understanding of bird-human relations, however, is drawn entirely from western contexts. They depict a normatively adversarial human-bird relationship, and they write approvingly of strategies for restricting pigeon-feeding that were successful in Switzerland. Such strategies that were tried, and failed abysmally, in India, where birdfeeding is more firmly established, and more enthusiastically practiced, and where the biopolitical culling and management of bird (and other) animal populations is not.^{xxiii} In turning to these films, I assert the significance of aesthetics and religion, as much as biopolitics, in determining what humans do to the other-than-humans among them. Both pigeons and kites in India have survived and adapted through certain kinds of aesthetic fascination. For pigeons, this has been the practice of *kabutarbazi*, or pigeon-keeping, that proliferated around the start of the common era as a

royal entertainment. By the time of the Mughal emperor Jehangir (1569-1627; reign period 1605-1627), *kabutarbaazi* was an elevated practice, somewhere between sport and art, with the pigeons trained to race, respond to calls, and perform other entertainments for their human keepers. Kites, like other hawks, have benefited from a fascination with their flight patterns, as well as with the spectacle they produce when fed. Whereas the feeding of meat to kites is generally associated with Muslim religious beliefs, the spectacle of the circling kites is itself an object of admiration, whether by the illustrator Lockwood Kipling in the early twentieth century or by the writer David Pinault in the early twenty-first.

Pigeons on Film: Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (“The Brave-Hearted Will Take Home the Bride, or DDLJ, 1995)

Kites and pigeons, like many Indian animals, are supported through what biologists term “ritual subsidies”: human feeding practices that are religiously coded. Pigeons are fed across religious groups, though they receive their most enthusiastic care from Jains and Hindus; kites are fed by Muslims; and vultures, now nearly extinct, were fed by Parsi burial rituals. As with all religion in the subcontinent, these distinctions are foci rather than boundaries. For example, vultures are venerated by both Muslims and Hindus at a shrine in Uttar Pradesh^{xxiv}; pigeons are fed by Muslims at the Wazir Khan mosque in Lahore, and venerated by Sikhs at Gurudwara Kabutar Sahib in Rajasthan; and kites are sacred to Hindu worshippers of Chamunda in Rajasthan. (These are but an eccentric sample: the full accounting of human-bird religious relations in India is certainly far larger.)

And yet, ideas of the animal-free city have their adherents in India as well, some of whose claims are increasingly supported by research in public health. With the notable rise in cases of pigeon lung in Mumbai, pigeon-feeding was criminalized in Mumbai in July 2025, when the Bombay High Court banned pigeon-feeding in public places. The city’s municipal corporation

(Brihanmumbai Corporation, BMC) accordingly moved to close all of Mumbai's fifty-one kabutarkhanas (roughly, "pigeon places"), long used for the feeding of large numbers of feral pigeons in the city. When the BMC covered the Dadar kabutarkhana, established in central Mumbai (then Bombay) in 1933, a mob of protesters, most of them Jain, and many of them women, soon assembled. They tore off the cover and forced the area open, and months of protests followed.

India's most iconic film about migration, *DDLJ*, uses pigeons as a central trope. *DDLJ* opens with a scene of the patriarch Baldev (Amrish Puri) feeding pigeons in Trafalgar Square, accompanied with a voiceover commentary that expresses his deep longing for his Indian homeland. London is the world's greatest city, where he has lived for twenty-two years, and yet, he tells us, he still feels not at home. Only the pigeons truly know him, for he, too, is like them: countryless, driven only by the need for food. Once he is fed, he, too, will fly – and, specifically, to fly home to Punjab. The *kabootar* in these shots are atmosphere, never closeup: the subtitles caption them as doves. We cut between them and Baldev, and we see them flying, but we never see a direct interaction between man and bird. This opening scene then cuts to a song about how koels – *Eudynamys*, or cuckoos – sing in the springtime, paired with a shot of women dancing in the fields of the Punjab. Not a single bird is visible, but a birdy logic is prominent.

Half a movie later, Baldev has indignantly taken his daughter Simran (Kajol) and family back to India – specifically, to the Punjab – to avoid her Westernisation, chiefly manifest in her love for Raj (Shah Rukh Khan), an Indian happily raised and resident in London. Baldev intends to marry Simran, against her will, to the son of his childhood friend, a young man born and raised in India itself. Raj follows Simran and her family to Punjab, where Simran repeatedly asks him to run away with her. Raj, resolute in a patriarchal values that he names as a specifically Indian emphasis on the family, refuses to marry her unless Baldev approves. The first half of *DDLJ* is Raj wooing Simran; the second half is mostly Raj wooing Baldev.

In the latter half of the film, we see Baldev feeding pigeons in the Punjabi farmlands, now joined by Raj. Raj and Baldev face the camera directly – no birds visible – as Baldev explains how he was brought here by his own father as a child. He speaks of friendship and companionship with these *kabutar* in particular – and this time, the subtitles say pigeons. Raj attempts to claim a similarity between the pigeons of England and those here, suggesting that the pigeons here may simply have flown to England. For Baldev, in contrast, the pigeons of England are “just pariahs,” whereas the Punjabi pigeons are kin. *DDLJ* fixates on establishing authentically Indian ideas of family and marriage for its humans, even as its central patriarch repeatedly claims his kinship with pigeons. Pigeons may be global, but pigeon-feeding is part of what makes Baldev authentically Indian.

At the beginning of the movie, Raj seems dangerously Westernised. He is also, not incidentally, a bad feeder of pigeons, throwing the feed improperly, failing to call to them, and even snacking on the feed when Baldev looks away. But Raj slowly learns to feed the pigeons as Baldev does, and during their pigeon-feeding we suddenly witness an injured bird falling from the sky – or, to be precise, falling into the frame. They rush over, and Raj heals the bird by coating it with the soil of his Indian homeland – a trick, he explains, taught to him by his mother. The strong implication is that Simran’s fiancé has shot the pigeon. By healing a pigeon, rather than hurting it, Raj proves that he, rather than the Indian-raised fiancé, is the most Indian and hence most suitable groom. Once India’s magical dirt has been applied, Raj releases, into the fields and the center of the frame, a fully healed (and fully white) bird.

DDLJ’s central narrative considers the dilemmas that migration poses to identity, juxtaposing not only England and India but also the urban (London) with the rural (Punjab), and locating identity within the family. Raj refuses to marry Simran unless Baldev approves, and Baldev is finally moved by Raj’s commitment to patriarchy, rather than his daughter Simran’s sustained distress. By tying authentic Indianness to resolutely patriarchal values, *DDLJ* made “Indianess” portable,

decisively influencing the decades of popular filmmaking that followed, in which Indian films increasingly sought to please both domestic and diasporic Indian viewers. *DDLJ* also, I want to suggest, tied Indianness to pigeon-care: Baldev realizes that there are pigeons everywhere, while the westernized Raj reanimates his family's commitment to pigeon-care. As long as you feed pigeons, instead of shooting them, and adhere to patriarchal values, you, too, can remain Indian as you move.

Today, “kabutarbazi” persists, in some parts of India, as a relationship between pigeons and their human-keepers. It also serves as the slang term for human trafficking, particularly from north Indian states like Punjab and Haryana. We thus see, in *DDLJ* as in contemporary parlance, a sustained association between pigeons and migration, even though pigeons themselves are not migratory birds. This association persists, I suggest, because of the manner in which pigeons, in their pervasiveness across varied human contexts, serve to connect rather than differentiate the urban from the rural. Baldev feeds pigeons in the city, and he feeds pigeons in the field, and through the process, he can see how these disparate places connect.

The urban is usually defined in terms of human population density, but this definition has serious limitations, both for ecology and for the study of the global South. As scholars like Amita Baviskar and Maan Barua have argued, despite their sometimes-staggering population densities, Indian cities are not simply urban. Instead, they incorporate the pastoral and agricultural modes to varying and uneven degrees, reflected in a formation that Jai Sen famously called “the unintended city.” Similarly, in South Africa, as Melissa R McHale, David N Bunn, et al have shown, urban ecological theory is better served by a concept of “the urban continuum,” using “an integrated rural livelihoods framework” in which the “urban and rural are actually the same.” This is because “people can exist in both phases of development [urban and rural] simultaneously”^{xxxv}; looking at India, we might add that cities can do the same, operating as urban and rural at once. Pigeons, we can safely assume, would be in all parts of this continuum.

For ecologists, definitions of the urban based on human population density fail to capture the significance of urbanization's environmental impact. An ecologically useful definition of the urban, Francis and Chadwick argue, would instead foreground "the environmental modifications that accompany urbanisation," perhaps by considering "land surface cover of the built environment" alongside human population density.^{xxvi} Revisions of "the urban" from a global South perspective thus dovetail nicely with the suggestions of biologists and conservationists, and pigeons, and the world that humans have built with pigeons, can be relevant to this project. Domesticated very early and now primarily feral, pigeons in their literal and cultural proliferation ask us to step back from the emphasis on industrialization and stages of development that has long animated conceptions of both the city and the urban. Thirty years ago, the pigeons of *DDLJ* showed a patriarch the transnational entanglement of rural and urban; today, pigeons can help us respond to scholars' call for "a paradigm that embraces urban-rural connectivity globally."^{xxvii}

Kites on Film: All that Breathes (2022)

Unlike terrestrial synanthropic animals, birds have not seen the extensive regulation, restriction, and expulsion from the contemporary city. I have wondered if this "avian exception" relates to what Sen describes as the "verticality" of *All That Breathes*: that "a new city comes into being when one thinks of the vertical axis."^{xxviii} As he explains, "One of the reasons the kites fall is that people fly paper kites. A lot of the kite flying areas are dingy and have narrow lanes, and when the horizontal axis is so cramped and claustrophobic, very often there is a psychic crutch that gets deployed vis-à-vis the vertical axis."^{xxix} Both understandings of the English word kite are thus participants in the verticality that Sen finds and films in his depiction of Delhi. Perhaps we, the non-avian inhabitants of the terrestrial and hence horizontal city, find the presence of birds in our

“urban” environments to be activating the verticality that we seek, precisely in order to escape the cramping of the urban itself.

All That Breathes juxtaposes a central narrative of bird rehabilitation alongside a background story that is far more familiar to India-related viewers. The film centers on a Muslim family during the 2020 protests around India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) with its religiously discriminatory institutionalization of Indian belonging. The CAA, along with projects like the National Register of Citizens (NRC), undermines Muslim Indians’ claims to Indianness through a bureaucratic regime, often by declaring that their documents to be fraudulent or incomplete. The brothers at the center of the film, Nadeem Shehzad and Mohammad Saud, are Muslim Indians, yet the sufferings of birds, rather than those of humans, are foregrounded in the film. The film focuses on the brothers, as well as their cousin Salik Rehman, who treat injured kites in their home. The remaining family members, including wives, children, and an elderly father, feature repeatedly but peripherally. Nadeem’s wife explicitly chooses to attend the CAA protests, but when she asks Nadeem to come, he demurs: if he leaves to protest for the rights of his family, who will care for the birds?

All That Breathes won several awards at major international film festivals, as well as widespread global distribution: it is about as successful as a documentary can be. Faced with the frequent question of whether it is “an Indian film,” Sen responds: “The characters are Indian, it’s filmed entirely in India, the majority of the crew is Indians. Yes, the money has come from different countries, but please understand that these are grants where a global circuit of films, not just from the Global South, compete.”^{xxx} The choice of human-kite relations speaks in part to this highly competitive filmmaking context, in which an Indian documentary film must be at once globally appealing and yet India-specific.

Santasil Mallik has noted how contemporary Indian documentary “filmmakers deploy hybridized forms rather than leveraging the ideals of documentary truth or evidentiary accuracy,”^{xxxix} noting that this shift is connected to a wider shift from national to international funding regimes. The newly independent Indian state had a Films Division that promoted documentary films on education, nation-building, and propaganda, yet with the Indian Emergency (1975-77), a newly cacophonous political culture included new forms of protest-oriented documentary filmmaking. There soon emerged a genre of documentary that was less invested in objectivity, often leveraging personal narratives to explore the complexity of identity and representation. As Mallik explains, the narrative grammar of these documentaries changed in turn, as documentary became “a mode of truth-making,” questioning rather than affirming inherited expectations of “truthful, objective representation.”^{xxxix} *All That Breathes* is very much part of this project, “making” a truth about kites in Delhi rather than giving us a “truthful” account of their existence.

Sen has spoken of arriving to the film through a search for “people who personified or embodied deep or profound relationships with the skies.”^{xxxix} This search for the deep and the profound was in the service of a kind of common sense: in Delhi, “everybody knows that there’s this kind of gray sensorium.”^{xxxix} Sen further explains, “The idea was to enchant the skies. I wanted people to exit the theaters and look up.”^{xxxix} The film works, as Bishnupriya Ghosh explains, to “shoot this avian protagonist looking not *at* but *with* the kite,” using sky shots that do not use a telephoto lens, with the result that “these shots pitch the spectator toward the kites’ majestic movement in depthless expanses.”^{xxxix} Given the cramped space of the brothers’ home and clinic, as well as the densely congested area of Delhi in which they live, the shift between indoor and outdoor shots creates an “Oscillati[on] between congestion and release [that] only reinforces the sense of difficulty of breathing.” Many of the shots are “from the level of the birds, at *their line of sight*,” even when this means that the shot frames humans in unexpected ways.^{xxxix} And when we have “extreme

closeups of an avian visage where the bird meets ‘our’ gaze, the lighting from the side retains the bird’s opacity—and its radical alterity.”^{xxxviii} The strategic use of low lighting, as well as the extensive manipulation of focus and depth of frame, means that vision and mastery are delinked in the process of the film’s showing. In a final move that adds to the species-ish framing, the human characters are mixed up as well. As Irina Leimbacher notes, “Characters are never named on screen, and we must decipher the relations among the main three and the extended family that shares the brothers’ home,” with even the voiceovers left unattributed.^{xxxix}

The *All That Breathes* team had no previous experience working or filming animals, nor in making nature documentaries. Sen describes this inexpertise as “a good thing, because we weren’t aspiring for that kind of look, where the dazzling beauty of the animal itself takes your breath away.”^{xl} Instead, they sought to use the camera as “a suturing tool between animality and the human species.”^{xli} This operates through shots that force the viewers’ attention to move across the scales of human and other-than-human lives, and via long takes of animal activities that assert their significance, rather than merely their interruption, within the human-centered storyline. Describing the cinema as “a privileged form that allows the dense representational logic needed to convey entanglement” between humans and animals,^{xlii} Sen proposes a particularly significant relationship between documentary filmmaking and birdwatching:

The similarities are stunning: showing up, blending into the background, and being patient. A good birdwatcher won’t wear colourful clothes, won’t make sudden movements, and will decelerate. They don’t look through individual branches, but try to spot *movement*. They train their eyes to spot tremors at the fringes of their vision. And a lot of creative, observational documentary practice is inherently like birdwatching. Of course, in this case, this actually became literal and all those metaphors get stapled in.^{xliii}

For many, perhaps most viewers, *All That Breathes* is a film about birds, and about environmental catastrophe. This is particularly true for viewers with no strong connections to India, for whom the film’s languid shots and arresting soundscape unfold as a kind of parable. The environment is, in

fact, collapsing, and we are, in fact, connected to birds. Documentary filmmaking resembles birdwatching, and the documentary film, in turn, serves as an opportunity for the birdwatcher.^{xliv}

For most viewers familiar with India, however, *All That Breathes* is not really about birds at all. Instead, Anna M M Vetticad argues that “the film focuses as much on human beings as on birds, though the way it has been framed leaves it wide open to interpretation.” She argues that the film “transforms from a chronicle of Nadeem and Saud's mission to save kites into a document of the tenuous position of Muslims in contemporary India, juxtaposed with existential questions about the interdependence of species.”^{xlv} Indeed, Sen has acknowledged the need for a filmmaker to “carefully choose” and “obliquely” communicate within India’s current political environment,^{xlvi} describing the brothers as “very politically aware” but more concerned with “the cosmological politics between man and bird, between humans and sky.”^{xlvii}

Vetticad describes as “inexplicable the filmmaker's decision to exclude information about why Delhi's kites are collapsing so routinely.”^{xlviii} This obfuscation is crucial to the film’s success, enabling the human viewer to attribute it to what reviewers frequently call “ecological catastrophe,” and what Sen often implies in his references to Delhi’s poor air quality. The film includes environmental observations from the brothers that emphasize dystopian change: for instance, a series of images of industrial exhaust, landfill, and tangled wires with monkeys climbing across is paired with uncanny music and a voice explaining that Delhi’s air has changed, songbirds are singing at higher pitches, and geckos’ feet are changing. The brothers are keen, if autodidact, ornithologists, and they speak of the innovative nature of urban kites, noting their adaptations over multiple generations and stating that humans are these birds’ natural environment. And yet, the film works against this acknowledgement, developing a different logic instead.

The actual cause of frequent injury is the glass-coated string, or *manjha*, used to fly kites for competitive purposes, an activity that is strongly encoded within patriotic, regional, and religious

tradition. To name the *manjha* as a villain is to explicitly position kite versus kite, and to highlight a tradition endangers birds alongside the feeding traditions that sustain them. The danger that human-made kites pose to other-than-human kites forms a tight linguistic nexus within the subtitled film, a film whose dialogues are in Hindi-Urdu with frequent English words. Europeans were late adapters of kites, with the word for the flying object surfacing in English only in the seventeenth century. Consequently, the object shares the name of the flying animal the English already knew, the red kite (*Milvus milvus*, previously *Milvus iclinus*). England's kites have been widely persecuted, with mass killings rendering the red kite extinct in England, Ireland, and Scotland by the mid-nineteenth century.^{xlix} When India's kites, *Milvus migrans govinda*, received their English name, they inherited not only the Anglophone bias against the kite but also an additional casteist slur. The birds we now call black kites were long termed "pariah kites," thus carrying the name of an oppressed caste group in South India, a Tamil Dalit community called *Paraiyar* whose very name became an English term for ostracization. In Delhi's dominant language of Hindi-Urdu, these birds are called *cheek*: the word has no resemblance to that for kite, *patang*, nor does it hold any negative connotations.

The very different fates of European kites and Indian kites thus gives the film some of its global poignance. To the viewer more familiar with England than with India, saving kites is noble, heroic, and even countercultural. To the viewer familiar with Delhi, or even with other parts of India, saving kites is pleasant but incidental, supported by widespread sympathy for the bird but unrelated to any crisis. In attempting to preserve the film's bird-centered pathos, Sen has highlighted and championed the brothers' work, telling the KCRW public radio station in Los Angeles, USA, that the brothers have rescued 25,000 raptors over the last fifteen years.¹ Yet having dramatized as a crisis something that is not a crisis, Sen then finds himself clarifying, trying to place these numbers back within a reasonable scale. As the radio show explains, "On any given day the brothers may find a staggering 25-30 birds who have fallen down, though in three years of shooting the film Sen has

only seen one black kite drop. ‘It’s not like, if you look up every now and then a bird pops down.’”^{li}

In these confusions between the local and the global, between animal welfare and wildlife conservation, and between the English kite and the Indian *cheel*, absurdity reigns. *Milhus, homo sapiens*, and documentary filmmaking may all be global, but kite-human relations are local and specific.

The brothers reminisce, early on, about their early encounters with the kites. They were taken as children to the Muslim ritual of kite-feeding (*cheel ko ghosht khalana, cheel-ghosht sawab*). They’d lie on the ground and watch them circling, feeling dizzy from their motions, as though they might fall into the sky. This magical feeding experience is what biologists will describe as “Muslim ritual subsidies,” with meat distributed to the kites either directly or through payment for the service, in anticipation of divine reward (*sawab*), and in particular the consumption and hence extirpation of one’s sins.^{lii} In our current moment, Islamic authorities in India and Pakistan frequently seek to remove animal veneration from Muslim practice, particularly through the interventions of male religious authorities upon women believers.^{liii} The brothers explicitly mention that it was their mother who taught them about the religious significance of apparent animals, through stories of saints and benevolent spirits who appear to be cats, vultures, snakes, and insects.^{liv} It is from their mother, they explain, that they learned to see all that breathes without differentiation, be they trees, fungus, grass: to see the natural and the supernatural utterly mixed together.^{lv} This connection between kinship and avian-human relations culminates in the film’s most circulated voiceover. Watching a black screen towards we hear that we should care for something not because of a shared nationality, philosophy, or politics, but rather because “Life itself is a kind of relationship. We are all a community of air.” The specific terms of this voiceover – *rishtedari* (kinship, or family relationships) and *biradari* (clan, community, or lineage) – are worth noting. A *rishta* is a relationship, so to say that “life itself is a kind of *rishtedari*” is to describe life (*zindagi*) itself as broadly relational:

an ecosystem full of relatives (*rishtedar*). A *biradari*, in contrast, is a kinship structure of specificity, and it is generally defined around a shared line of descent.

The monologue continues, bleakly: “For this reason we cannot abandon the birds. Every day more kites fall into our cage from the sky. Every day Nannu finds more cigarette butts.”^{lvi} Nannu is the young boy who shows up repeatedly in the film, mostly shooed away by his father even as he asks his father to play with him. Sometimes, he plays with a phone; frequently, he coughs, made ill from the bad air around him. The film’s depiction of Nadeem’s care for birds is also the depiction of Nadeem’s neglect of his son, for the *biradari* of air has superseded ideas of family-based caregiving. In an interview with the *New York Times*, undertaken during the time of *All That Breathes*’ filming, Nadeem declared that in caring for the kites “We have destroyed our family life.... We have destroyed our relations with our friends, our relatives, our wives, our parents, even our 2- and 4-year-old children.”^{lvii} Yet those explicit sentiments were not included in the film, making it easier for viewers to ignore the child just as the brothers mostly ignore him, if we so wish. The political choices of the brothers also manifest along a gendered axis: even as their wives take the risk of attending the protests in Shaheen Bagh, even as concerns are voiced about possible challenges to their father’s citizenship papers, the brothers stay home, absorbed by their other-than-family work. A film that has repeatedly emphasized the close kinship between these two brothers, even confusing them in unattributed voiceovers, has also shown us their significant alienation from their other living human kin – if, that is, we are willing to see it.

The film repeatedly shows the collection of injured kites in boxes, though it does not clarify where these boxes originate. This collection occurs primarily through the work of other bird rescue organizations, including the Jain bird hospital that turned away their first injured kite.^{lviii} Unable to care for the kites because they are religiously prohibited from handling the meat the kites need to consume, the Jain-run hospital sends them to the Muslim-run organization at the center of the film

– a dynamic that the film never acknowledges. The Jains’ sending away for the nonvegetarian birds is not abandonment but care. The film, however, encourages the assumption that kites have been discriminated against for their meat-eating, much as caste-oppressed humans and Muslims are increasingly discriminated against for theirs. The “truth-making” project of *All That Breathes* thus includes a vision of interspecies solidarity defined by meat consumption, as the very real discrimination faced by the Muslim brothers is suggestively expanded to the experiences of black kites.^{lix} These suspicions of discrimination against the kites are important to the film’s final message, as Delhi erupts in anti-Muslim riots. As the city burns, terrifyingly close to the family home and its bird hospital, Saud tell us that riots are “nothing new,” and yet these riots are different. Instead of just hatred, these riots also display disgust: by terming some people termites and rats, Saud explains, the haters have made it a matter of “hygiene” (English in the original). Having now moved away entirely from the optimism of a community of air (*hawa ka biradiri*), Saud glumly asserts that birds are differentiated, much like humans, and that “Violence is always a message.” *All That Breathes* ends with more optimistic visuals, and with a more promising narrative arc, as Nadeem moves to the US to study more about birds. Yet the film ends, to be precise, on a video call: Nadeem framed by a bright blue sky in the US, Saud left behind in Delhi. The frame freezes, the call drops, and the film ends. In North America, there is expertise about *Milvus*, but there are no birds of that genus.

Conclusion

Milvus migrans govinda is frequently described as “the most successful raptor in the world,” and Delhi “hosts what is probably the largest raptor concentration in the world.”^{lx} These kites eat not only garbage but also the other animals that consume that garbage, including pigeons and doves. They thereby “providing fundamental ecosystem and sanitary services” to a publicly insanitary city, not least because “much of the urban fauna is [otherwise] dominated by small species with diets

dominated by plant material.”^{lxi} Most Delhi residents seem aware of this garbage-eating function, and they appreciate the kites’ service. Kites may be found worldwide, but the kite-human relationship seems highly specific. The opportunistic predation and scavenging that led to their stigmatization in England, Ireland, and Scotland becomes, in India, the traits for which they are cherished. The *cheel* surfaces even in Kipling, both father Lockwood’s *Beast and Man in India* (1891) and son Rudyard’s *Jungle Book* (1894). In 1879, S.W. Fallon archived a handful of *cheel* related proverbs, some of which persist to this day.

Kites also survive on Muslim feeding practices, and as a result, they seek out Delhi’s Muslim colonies. In a housing market where religious discrimination is rampant, certain areas are clearly more Muslim than others – and, researchers found, kites consistently found and nested near these “Muslim colonies.” They sought areas with busy streets, poor hygiene, and large Muslim populations: circumstances that are fortunate for the kites but are often generated by Muslims’ misfortune. Yet even kites would prefer to live without too much trash everywhere: “low-refuse sites were selected if found close to Muslim colonies, while locations with much refuse were over-selected when far from Muslim subsidies.”^{lxii} The kites sought an urbanism of the street, not of the building: “because refuse is often disposed of by people in a disorganized and unpredictable manner in Delhi, high levels of human activity in the streets likely implies more waste accumulation in these areas. This may provide food directly for kites or for co-occurring species that may in turn represent live prey for kites, such as small mammals or pigeons.”^{lxiii} In addition, when “close to Muslims, kites preferred neighbourhoods with abundant green cover, which may accommodate more nests and facilitate colony-formation.”^{lxiv} When nesting further away from Muslim colonies, “kites preferred sites with low green cover, which will limit density, thus lowering competition for limited food.”^{lxv} We are accustomed to thinking of birds as seeking out trees, woodlands, and other plants. We may

be less accustomed to thinking of birds as seeking out Muslims, and of planning their community size in response to the size of the Muslim community.

In addition to finding Muslims, they arguably integrate from above, in an ecological sense, what humans have segregated down below. Kites seek to nest in areas that were proximate to multiple Muslim colonies, and their choices thereby create an ersatz network between these varied neighborhoods. And because “access to hotspots of ritualized feeding modulated the suitability of other habitats, even when these were located kilometres away from such sites,” the kites “functionally integrated far-away components of the urban ecosystem.”^{lxvi} Delhi’s uncleanness is constitutively tied to the persistent hierarchies of the caste system. There are no dominant-caste sanitation workers in India. Today, as for millennia, the cleaning of India is undertaken by those from Dalit or otherwise marginalized caste communities, almost always under abysmal living and working conditions. This marginalization of the sanitation worker, as well as the disidentification of dominant caste persons from the work of sanitation, contributes to the enormous landfills and abundant roadside waste upon which the kites (and their supportive species) feast. In this sense, humans’ casteism is arguably the kites’ gain.

I am a humanist, not an ornithologist, and I had assumed, when I started writing this paper, that the birds in these human-made films were primarily a way for humans to say something about humans. Birds look good on film, and birds, it seemed at first viewing, were a convenient visual practice to render entirely human concerns around migration and belonging into a cinematically appealing form. As I researched, however, the specific relations of pigeons, kites, and humans, something much stranger came into view. Both films, in very different ways, exclude the kinds of bird-filming that makes birds so cinematic: *DDLJ* lacks iconic shots of pigeons flying up in large numbers, barely showing pigeons in any detail, while *All That Breathes* skips the birds-eye view as well as close-ups of flying birds. Instead, in both films, synanthropic birds complicate our assumptions

about human belonging, whether by undermining the coherence of “the urban” through pigeons or by opening up “the vertical city” through kites. Synanthropy makes no claims to human expectations, nor does it require human ideas around boundaries or belonging. For this reason, we can use the synanthropic species to think more broadly about questions of human settlement, movement, and migration. When you set up a city, who shows up, uncalled and uninvited? And when they show up, having adapted to your habitat, what stories will you tell about the avian relations that you pursue?

ⁱ <https://thepolyphony.org/2025/12/17/breathing-together-multispecies-care-in-shaunak-sens-all-that-breathes/>

ⁱⁱ For a journalistic summary, see Shivji, Salimah. “Mumbai doctors blame pigeons for spike in lung disease.” *CBC News* 27 Dec 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/mumbai-india-pigeons-lung-disease-1.7062418>

For a scholarly account, see Almeida F, Christy A, Bhosle M, Jatale R, Ramchandran S. Prevalence of hypersensitive pneumonitis specific IgG antibodies in the Indian population: A retrospective study [Internet]. *IP Indian J Immunol Respir Med*. 2023 [cited 2026 Aug 24];8(3):87-94. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.18231/j.ijirm.2023.019>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://doi.org/10.1183/13993003.congress-2019.PA4737>

^{iv} Kumar et al., “Human-Attacks by an Urban Raptor Are Tied to Human Subsidies and Religious Practices,” 6.

^v Kumar et al, 346

^{vi} Kumar et al., “Human-Attacks by an Urban Raptor Are Tied to Human Subsidies and Religious Practices,” 6.

^{vii} Johnston, Richard F. “Synanthropic Birds of North America.” In Marzluff, Bowman, and Donnelly, eds., *Avian Ecology and Conservation in an Urbanizing World*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, pp.49-68. Quote on p.50.

^{viii} Francis and Chadwick, “What Makes a Species Synurbic?” 2012, p.514

^{ix} Francis and Chadwick, “What Makes a Species Synurbic?” 2012, p.514

^x Francis and Chadwick, “What Makes a Species Synurbic?” 2012, p.514

^{xi} A longer list would include dark-eyed juncos, blackbirds, magpies, housefinches, light-vented bulbuls, monk parakeets, Torresian crows, great tits, great tailed grackles, northern mockingbirds, white-crowned sparrows. Francis and Chadwick, 516-7

^{xii} Francis and Chadwick, 517

^{xiii} Boisseron xxiii

^{xiv} The first usage is a 1966 article in the *New York Times*; see <https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/birds/feral-pigeon-flying-rat-or-urban-hero>

^{xv} S. Hoon Song, “The Great Pigeon Massacre in a deindustrializing American region”

^{xvi} Quot. in Pinault, 110

^{xvii} Kumar et al, 4.

^{xviii} Nishant Kumar et al., “Human-Attacks by an Urban Raptor Are Tied to Human Subsidies and Religious Practices,” *Scientific Reports* 9, no. 1 (2019): 5–6, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-38662-z>.

^{xix} Serres 7, 8.

^{xx} <https://youtu.be/2gUuAV9KNKk?si=aRLuEPy5-rkzvpc>

^{xxi} Barua, 89, 188

^{xxii} Donaldson and Kymlicka intro pp.17-18

^{xxiii} Donaldson and Kymlicka, 43.

^{xxiv} Taneja, 216-7.

^{xxv} McHale, Bunn, Pickett, and Twine, “Urban Ecology in a Developing World,” 557, 558.

^{xxvi} Francis and Chadwick 515

^{xxvii} McHale et al, 562

^{xxviii} <https://www.anthroposphere.co.uk/post/all-that-breathes?currency=USD>

^{xxix} <https://www.anthroposphere.co.uk/post/all-that-breathes?currency=USD>

xxx Shaunak Sen, "Shaunak Sen's All That Breathes: A Great Grey Triangulation of Air, Birds, and Men," interview by Bedatri D. Choudhury, n.d., Documentary Magazine, <https://www.documentary.org/feature/shaunak-sens-all-breathes-great-gray-triangulation-air-birds-and-men>.

xxxii Santasil Mallik, "The Personal and the Fictional: Aesthetic Mediation in the Indian Documentary," *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 15, no. 1 (2023): 44, https://doi.org/10.1386/safm_00069_1.

xxxiii Mallik, "The Personal and the Fictional: Aesthetic Mediation in the Indian Documentary," 47.

xxxiv Sen, "Shaunak Sen's All That Breathes: A Great Grey Triangulation of Air, Birds, and Men."

xxxv Sen, "Shaunak Sen's All That Breathes: A Great Grey Triangulation of Air, Birds, and Men."

xxxvi Bishnupriya Ghosh, "A Community of Air," <https://docalogue.com/All-That-Breathes/>, n.d.

xxxvii Ghosh, "A Community of Air."

xxxviii Ghosh, "A Community of Air."

xxxix Leimbacher, Irina. "Towards an Aesthesis of... Air" <https://docalogue.com/all-that-breathes/>

xl <https://www.anthroposphere.co.uk/post/all-that-breathes?currency=USD>

xli <https://www.anthroposphere.co.uk/post/all-that-breathes?currency=USD>

xlii <https://www.anthroposphere.co.uk/post/all-that-breathes?currency=USD>

xliii <https://www.anthroposphere.co.uk/post/all-that-breathes?currency=USD>

xliv Sen attributes his interest in this film to an early stint at the Urban Ecologies project at Cambridge University. He is fully aware of the significant kite population in Delhi, and he attributes some of his inspiration to avian-themed books like *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (Max Porter, 2019), *H is for Hawk* (Helen Macdonald, 2014), and *The Peregrine* (J.A. Baker, 1967).

xlvi <https://www.himalmag-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/all-that-breathes-oscars-india-muslims-documentary-film/>

xlvi Sen, "Shaunak Sen's All That Breathes: A Great Grey Triangulation of Air, Birds, and Men."

xlvi <https://www.anthroposphere.co.uk/post/all-that-breathes?currency=USD>

xlvi <https://www.himalmag-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/all-that-breathes-oscars-india-muslims-documentary-film/>

xlvi OED, "kite."

i Kim Masters, Feb 24, 2023, "Shaunak Sen Tells an Emotional, Ecological Story in *All That Breathes*."

<https://www.kcrw.com/shows/the-business/stories/shaunak-sen-all-that-breathes>

ii Kim Masters, Feb 24, 2023, "Shaunak Sen Tells an Emotional, Ecological Story in *All That Breathes*."

<https://www.kcrw.com/shows/the-business/stories/shaunak-sen-all-that-breathes>

iii Their explanation of this ritual comports with the accounts heard by Anand Vivek Taneja in Delhi in 2014, and by David Pinault in Lahore in 2002. In Pinault's account, the act of feeding through payment was more important than the feeding itself, as drivers rushed off without waiting for the ritual to be completed (113). In *All that Breathes*, the feeding is the point.

iii Pinault 120, Taneja 208

liv billi baba, gidddon ke mazaar, aur jo djinn saap aur kiren banke dikhte hain....

lv Jo jo cheezein saas lehte hain, unme koi faraq nahi dekhna chahiye. Per, fungus, ghaas, matlab natural aur supernatural un ke liye ekdum mix ho jata tha.

lvi Cheezon ka parwa is liye nahi ki jaati kyunki uska desh, mazab ya unke politics aap jaise hai. Zindagi khud ek tarah ke rishtedari hain. Hum sab hawa ka biradiri hain. Is liye hum pakshion ko nahi chor sakte. Din ba din asmaan se aur cheelen girti hain hamare cage mein. Din ba din nannu ko aur cigarette butts milti hain.

lvii <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/science/kites-birds-conservation-india.html>

lviii <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/science/kites-birds-conservation-india.html>

lix In interviews, Nadeem has explicitly stated this allegation: "Why is there discrimination between a vegetarian and a nonvegetarian?" he thought. As Muslims, both he and Mr. Saud eat meat, and they took the hospital's rejection personally." <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/science/kites-birds-conservation-india.html>

lx Kumar et al, 340.

lxi Kumar et al, 340.

lxii Kumar et al, 343

lxiii Kumar et al, 344

lxiv Kumar et al, 346

lxv Kumar et al, 346

lxvi Kumar et al, 346