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Dependent Origination and *Karuna* in Human-Animal Relationship in Khumbu

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Abstract

This paper examines the human–animal relationship in Nepal’s Khumbu region through an examination of pastoral and logistical practices in the Himalaya, where yaks, naks, and *gyokpoes* (Yak-cow hybrid) serve as primary carriers for both local subsistence and the tourism economy. It engages with an ethical paradox: despite the region’s cultural framing as a non-violence zone, the continued reliance on animals as load-bearing agents in harsh ecological conditions raises questions within contemporary animal rights and welfare discourses. The paper argues that Sherpa engagements with animals are not best understood as instrumental exploitation, but as ethically mediated interdependence grounded in Buddhist ontological and moral thought. Drawing on a mixed method of empirical observation, personal interviews with six Sherpa inhabitants of the Himalaya and interpretive analysis of secondary sources, it also borrows insights from Buddhist concepts of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) and *karuṇā* (compassion) for theoretical anchorage. It proposes that Sherpa practices enact a compassion-regulated interdependence in which animals’ labor is utilized without denying their moral status as sentient co-inhabitants. This framework sustains, rather than resolves, the tension between use and care, contributing to environmental humanities and animal studies by foregrounding a Himalayan Sherpa model of relational ethics.

Keywords: Beasts of burden, human–animal relations, interdependence, *karuṇā*, *pratītyasamutpāda*, Khumbu

Introduction

Nepal’s Khumbu region is by and large a no-vehicle zone. Stanley F. Stevens writes, “There are no roads in the region,” encapsulating a reality that is true even to this date (15). Until recent times, the farthest distance up to which a vehicle could go was Salleri, the headquarters of Solu-Khumbu district. Recently, a dirt track has been opened up to Surke, and vehicles, including Bolero jeeps and trucks, commute (empirical observation). No vehicle is visible above the village of Surke.

Nevertheless, there are human settlements in several villages in this no-vehicle zone, right up to Gorakshap (5164 m) situated very close to Everest Base Camp (5364 m). Along left and right sides of the Everest Base Camp (EBC) trekking corridor as well, there are several Sherpa villages with substantial human population. They have been in existence without the aid of vehicles. This means, they have survived by adopting traditional means of transport and goods-ferrying. They largely commute on foot, while their major means of goods-ferrying are animals: yaks, naks, mules, *kyokpoes*, and horses. Thus, animals cannot be written off the everydayness of human settlement in Khumbu.

The use of animals for carrying goods—and in some special occasions people—in such an inhospitable clime like the one in Khumbu, might appear to be a case of exploitation at the surface level. The animal herders very often whip and force the beasts laden with heavy burdens through steep, high, narrow, and dangerous trails. Quite often, it is observed that even sick and injured animals are forced through these trails with heavy loads mounted on their backs. As caravans of several animals move together, the grooms—called *yakaji* in Khumbu—are seen whipping the recalcitrant animals that either drift aside, or stand still, barring the way for other animals or on-foot commuters, including trekkers and climbers. Such treatment of animals poses a context of tension: the Sherpas, who are Buddhists by religion see animals, like the humans, as embodiment of a transient soul and thus treat the animals as sentient beings—not to be subjected to any type of maltreatment, violence, or torture. In practice, however, they appear perpetrating coercion and violence. This tension between religious provisions and actual practice forms the core problem of this paper. Through empirical observation and interviews, it seeks to investigate if religious teachings within Buddhism inspire the Sherpas to refrain from violence against animals, foreground those provisions, and demonstrate their behavioral impact on the treatment of animals. It also seeks to understand if lack of knowledge about such prescriptions explains coercion or exploitation of the animals. It claims that the apparent coercion is both a necessity and an outcome of the ignorance of Buddhist prescriptions about *karuna*, whereas the refrainment from torturing beyond limits or even slaughtering is sustained by the general community belief that a Buddhist should not harm or hurt other living beings.

Review of Literature

The fact that animals are a part of Sherpas' day-to-day life has been acknowledged by several researchers. Traditionally, the Sherpas were farmers and cattle-herders, especially before mountaineering was brought to them by Western climbers and explorers. They have used animals to plough their fields, carry their goods across places including Nepal and Tibet for business purpose, or for deriving products like milk and wool. Meat derived from slaughtering an animal, however, is not a practice among the Sherpas, though they consume meat if an animal dies of a fall and a series injury that follows, or is slaughtered somewhere outside the Khumbu by other people and brought into their village. Barbara Brower details the nature of animal use in Khumbu as: "Livestock are central to the Sherpa way of life in Khumbu. Not all Sherpas own cattle, and only a few families are even dominantly dependent on livestock, yet agriculture, trade, and nearly every other facet of both traditional and transitional Sherpa life are intimately tied up with cattle and cattle keeping" (93). She also recognizes the religious sanctions on animal slaughtering in the Khumbu region:

Sherpas are enjoined by their religion from killing, and while they happily consume the flesh from animals killed by predators or in accidents (no matter how long after death the carcass is discovered, it seems), they will seldom slaughter anything themselves. Occasional encouragement of accidents on narrow trails is not unknown, and unwanted hybrid calves are sometimes helped to kill themselves, but in principle Sherpas will not slaughter their animals. (93)

Thus, Brower acknowledges the presence of religious indoctrination of the Sherpas vis-à-vis their treatment of domestic animals. However, she does not cite exact provisions within Buddhism that underpin such treatment. Buddhism by and large rests on the human viewpoints and pertains to enlightenment of the human mind. Thus, it sparingly addresses the animals. The incorporation of the sentience of the animals within its fold is, therefore, quite subtle. Brower does not engage herself in the identification of those subtle shades of Buddhist views on animals.

Brower also discusses a unique Sherpa practice of treating animals as ritual objects. She claims that some Sherpas consider livestock “*tshetar*” or “dedicated animals” that are fed and cared better than others and are “never killed” and “seldom used to carry loads,” as they are considered “somewhat sacred” (108). This is, however, an act of affective association—something like attachment to a personal possession. This does not exclusively hinge of religious awareness. The sacredness, Brower discusses in connection to a *tshetar* is an outcome of intimate association.

Yangji Doma Sherpa and Rijan Bhakta Kayastha have made a detailed study of livestock management in Khumbu. However, their study focuses on the gradual change visible in the pattern of livestock management, especially in tandem with the changing time and environmental specifications of the Himalaya. They foreground the fact that change in economic patterns in the life of the locals have impacted the choice of animals they pick maximize their profitability:

[The] total number of livestock in Khumbu has not declined, but their type and distribution have changed in each settlement. The male cattle breeds, especially the yak have increased drastically because of the high economic return acquired by using these animals for transporting loads of tourists. The growing tourism industry in Khumbu region is one of the major drivers of change that modifies the livestock population dynamics in different settlement and brought a transformation of barter-based trade to a monetary economy. (119)

Animal choice and type, however, do not offer a befitting context to understand cognitions that impact human-animal relationship, and the treatment of animals. Centrality of economic imperatives posits importance on benefits, and therefore, religious considerations become non-issues.

In a study on job diversification from pastoral economy to tourism, Jeremy Spoon examines the relationship between the Sherpas and the yaks in the changing times. He claims to have noticed less dependence on the agro-pastoral economy, including animal rearing, and a gradual shift toward tourism in recent decades:

In 2006–2007, I found Sherpa livestock holdings to be on the decline. Several families had sold their entire herds and others were maintaining small herd sizes compared to the past. The breeding of hybrids was also on the decline. The production of dairy products and the spinning of wool also appeared to lessen, especially with the ease of obtaining goods from Tibetans who visit Khumbu seasonally for commerce. Livestock were almost entirely used for the portering of tourism goods, especially the hybrids . . . however, human porters far outnumbered the use of livestock. (325–26)

Spoon’s claim of reduced dependence on animals for agro-pastoral purposes is true. However, the significance of animals in Khumbu has not fallen. Instead, it has been diversified. A decline in agriculture and domestic trade has been compensated by a surge in tourism, which is a sector that requires a huge movement of people and goods. Animals have, therefore, been shifted to portering business, in order to carry both domestic and commercial items that someone serve tourism. Mules, yaks and *gyokpoes* are seen in Khumbu today carrying LPG cylinders, tents, oxygen cylinders, climbing gears, and food items. They also carry wooden planks meant to be used while constructing new hotels and shelters for tourists. Another significant shift is seen in the fact that animals, that are parts of such portering caravans, are owned by contractors, and barely by individuals. Such contractors employ grooms to chase the animals loaded with goods for commercial firms: hotels, expedition outfitters, trekking agencies, etc. This research paper, however, does not deal with the emotional aspect of human-animal relationship. It limits itself to transactional analysis.

A review of the available works dealing with human-animal relationship in the Khumbu region reveals that studies are more focused on the economic aspect of the relationship. Some deal with the shift in the modes of animal employment, while others prove into the diversification of animal species and population over the decades. A few works like Brower’s acknowledge the influence of religion, especially Buddhism on that relationship. However, I could hardly get any profound academic study pinpointing the particular provisions within Buddhism that govern the human treatment of animals as sentient beings, resulting into their cautious and non-coercive treatment. This study offers to address this gap.

Buddhist Concepts of *Pratītyasamutpāda* and *Karuṇā*: Foundations of Rational Use of Animals in Khumbu

Buddhist scriptures and *Jataka* tales have ample instances that connect the Buddha to animals and consider animals a part of a soul's life cycle, as it passes through several life forms before attaining *nirvana*. Animals like the elephant are cited as connected to Buddha's life right from his birth:

The Bodhisattva, for instance, is shown as being born as an elephant in several *Jataka* stories of which the Chaddanta is the most celebrated. The Buddha is compared to the tamer of elephants; his ability to suffer pain patiently is likened to that of an elephant; and the *arahat* too is described as the lonely one like the elephant disporting himself in the forest or not being frightened of lightening like the elephant" (Gokhale 113).

A pillar at Sarnath, one of the significant centers of Buddhist pilgrimage in India, shows four animals standing in a row: elephant, bull, horse, and lion. This is among those rarest Buddhist emblems that manifestly include domestic animals: the bull, and the horse. Gokhale quotes Vincent Smith who argues that the four animals stand for "four cardinal directions" and cites the evidence of symbolism of the mythical "Anotatta lake with its four outlets shaped like the elephant, bull, horse, and lion" (116). Such emblematic representations affirm the primacy of animals in the Buddhist imagination.

The incorporation of the non-human world, including animals, within the Buddhist doctrine is partly inspired by the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*, often translated as the doctrine of dependent origination. The concept has been variously interpreted. However, there are common denominators among varied understandings that recognize the existence of a cause-and-effect relationship between anything that exists in the cosmos. Peter Harvey presents a simplified interpretation of the term:

‘That being, this comes to be; from the arising of that, this arises; that being absent, this is not; from the cessation of that, this ceases.’ This states the principle of conditionality, that all things, mental and physical, arise and exist due to the presence of certain conditions, and cease once their conditions are removed: nothing (except *Nirvāna*) is independent. The doctrine thus complements the teaching that no permanent, independent self can be found. The abstract principle expresses the general pattern found in series of conditioned and conditioning links (*nidāna*), culminating in the arising of *dukkha*, with *dukkha* ending when these cease. (65; emphasis original)

The concept is believed to have twelve conditioned or conditioning links called *nidānas*. What characterizes each *nidana* is spiritual ignorance. As long as such ignorance persists, there is no liberation from the web of these conditionalities, and therefore, from the web of life and birth. A being, while in the web, is destined to endure *dukkha* that comes in the course of existence. Harvey presents a gradation of the *nidanas* in the following order:

The series runs: (1) spiritual ignorance→ (2) constructing activities→ (3) (discriminative) consciousness→ (4) mind-and-body/ the sentient body → (5) the six sense-bases→ (6) sensory stimulation→ (7) feeling→ (8) craving→ (9) grasping→ (10) becoming→ (11) birth→ (12) ageing, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, unhappiness and distress; ‘Thus is the origin of this whole bundle of pain (*dukkha-kkhandha*).’ (Harvey 66)

The concept leads to the understanding that animals in Khumbu exist in a set of conditions they cannot help: tough terrain and climate. People living there, similarly, exist in related conditions and respond accordingly. The similarity of their conditions of being bring the people and the animals together, bound to comparable cause and effect relationship. The pain or *dukkha* pertaining to this relationship thus clings as a conditional reality. Therefore, neither animals, nor the human beings dependent on or attending on them, are independent actors. They are bound to each other by a karmic web.

The discussion, thus, posits spiritual ignorance, defined by Harvey not as “lack of information” but as “deep-seated misconception of reality” as a tether that binds someone to *dukkha*, and to *karmic* impositions (Harvey 67). It might be possible for people to undo such ignorance through meditative approach, which is not, however, affordable to the laities who workday in and day

out to survive. Thus, they linger with such ignorance. Such ignorance, as Harvey continues, is subject to influence by several factions, including “desire, ill-will, laziness, agitation and fear of commitment: the five ‘hindrances’ which are in turn conditioned by “bad conduct of body, speech or mind” which perpetuate such ignorance (67).

If complete spiritual awakening is not always affordable to the ignorant ones, the Buddhist doctrine of *karuna* or compassion at least allows the amelioration of the hindrances discussed above, thereby minimizing the coercive impact of such ignorance, if it involves other bodies.

The Buddhist, especially the Mahayana doctrine of compassion pertains to one’s right treatment of others. The followers of Mahayana believe “as wisdom aids compassion, compassion aids wisdom’s undercutting of self-centeredness, by motivating a life of self-sacrifice and active service for others” (Harvey 152). Particularly important for this work is the doctrine of *sattvārtha-kriyā*, defined as the ethics of “working for the welfare of beings through active help for them” (Harvey 153). Shantideva, in his *Bodhicāryavatāra*, has a verse that explains that concept of *sattvārtha-kriyā* in simple terms: “Ah, there should be great pity for those adrift in the flood of suffering, who, although miserable in this way, do not recognize their wretched situation” (134). The core doctrine of compassion in the Mahayana tradition comprises of several regulatory directives, as summarized by Harvey below:

The ethics of benefiting sentient beings is ministering to the needs of others by: nursing those who are ill; advising on how to attain worldly and transcendent goals; gratitude for help received and returning it; protection from wild animals, kings, robbers and the elements; comforting those stricken by calamities; giving to the destitute; attracting disciples by friendliness and then attracting material support for them; amenability to the (non-harmful) desires of others; applauding and pointing out others’ good qualities; compassionately humbling, punishing or banishing others in order to make them give up unwholesome ways and take to wholesome ones; using psychic powers to show the results of unwholesome actions in hells etc., and generally inspiring and teaching others. (153)

Ulrich Pagel lists compassion among four basic prerequisites for one to become a bodhisattva, the ideal being: “The first bodhisattva practices that are . . . the four immeasurables (*apramana*). These include benevolence (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equipoise (*upeksa*)” (125; emphasis original). These immeasurables are believed to be practices that “liberate the mind, eliminate all hindrances and prompt freedom from bondage” (Pagel 126). Practicing these ideas, they believe, secures them a “high rebirth” and “further progress on the path to liberation up to the stage of the non-return” (126). Thus, *karuna*, among other *apramana*, are, for the Buddhists, a way towards nirvana. This posits loving-kindness on a high behavioral plane for the Buddhists, and they are encouraged to exercise the same in their treatment of other beings: human, animals, or everyone or everything else for that matter. Tri Saputra Medhācitta lists the Buddhist principles of “non-violence (*ahimsa*), loving-kindness (*metta*), and compassion (*karuṇā*)” as foundations that offer a “rich ethical framework” to support animal rights through its emphasis on “non-violence, lovingkindness and compassion” (100). Stevens enumerates the Sherpa Buddhists’ perspective of looking at animals and other beings as sentient creatures:

Sherpas’ Buddhist ethics influence daily life and land use also in a number of other ways.

Buddhism gives Sherpas a strong belief in nonviolence towards other forms of life. Sherpas value the consciousness within all life, which they believe extends even to the smallest blades of grass. All Sherpas consider the killing of animals a sin and some believe that cutting trees or uprooting plants is sinful. . . . Many people go to great efforts to avoid even the killing of insects. (269)

The recognition of conditionalities that posit a being in a web of existence, and the significance of *karuna* for one’s liberation, both derived from Buddhist scriptures and worldviews, offer a befitting theoretical framework to analyze human-animal relationship in Khumbu from a Buddhist perspective, respecting the tension posed by Buddhist requirement of compassion in one hand, and compulsive use of the animals on the other. The aforementioned critical insights have been used as theoretical

parameters in this study. The parameters constitute the theoretical framework to analyze and discuss the data collection from the study area.

Discussion and Interpretation

The researcher made two trips of the Khumbu Region: first, between May 22 and June 5 in 2025, and between April 10 to 14, 2026. The first started at Salleri, the headquarters of Solu-Khumbu district and culminated at Everest Base Camp, turning sideways on the way forth and back to Salleri, Phakding, Namche, Tengboche, Pangboche, Dingboche, Pheriche, Thukla, Lobuche and Gorakhshep, to several other Sherpa villages including Khumjung, Manjo, Musey Gaon, Chaurikharka, Surke and Kharikhola on the way back. The second trip was from Salleri to Lukla, also stopping at Kharikhola and Surke on the way up and down the hilly terrain. Alongside empirical observations made in the field, the researcher also had seven semi-structured interviews—lasting from seven to ten minutes each—with Sherpas: five in the field, and one in Kathmandu, making sure that the informants have the experience of domesticating animals, or witnessing them being used for various purposes: milk, meat, wool, or portering services. Consent was sought from each of the informants before the interview to use their names and opinions in the paper. They have no objection to that. The following table details the informants:

Sl.	Name	Age	Original Place
1	Tashi Lama Sherpa	80	Khumjung, Solu-Khumbu (interviewed in Kathmandu)
2	Doma Sherpa	75	Solu Maphung, Solu-Khumbu
3	Palmu Sherpa	78	Bhusina, Okhaldhunga
4	Kima Sherpa	69	Salleri, Solu-Khumbu
5	Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa	76	Pangboche, Solu-Khumbu
6	Nimi Sherpa	68	Junbesi, Solu-Khumbu
7	Ramesh Kulung	18	Lukla, Solu-Khumbu

Majority of the respondents have been members of animal rearing families in the Khumbu, and the animals include yaks, naks, *gyokpoes*, and mules. The mules, they report, were less visible in Khumbu until a few decades ago. They were probably imported from Rolwaling and Western Himalayas. However, yaks, naks, and the *gyokpoes*—that are crossbreeds of cows and yaks—have been in existence in the Khumbu region since time immemorial.

The respondents were asked to narrate their experiences on four core areas: purpose of using various animals, modes of rearing, their feelings for the animals, and the religious prescriptions that govern their treatment of the animals.

Of the use animals are put into, almost all the respondents mention, agriculture, milk and transport. Before the coming of mountain tourism, the Sherpas relied on agriculture, and animals like yaks, *gyokpoes* and oxen were used for ploughing their fields, or as source of manure. Judy and Tashi Tenzing sketch a picture of Sherpa life before the dawn of mountain tourism: “All of [the] Sherpa communities lived an isolated and undisturbed existence for centuries, rarely venturing far from their villages except for those in trade with Tibet and India. They grazed their yak herds in the high summer pastures, often above 5000 meters, during the warm months and grew potatoes and barely in small terraced plots of land near their homes” (3). Sherpa and Wenger quote Fürer von Haimendorf who makes the claim that in 1976, “about half of the households in Khumbu were involved in raising domestic animals” (30). This trend continues even today though to a lesser extent. Sherpa and Wengel credit “growing tourism business and increasing globalization” for the gradual dwindling of animal husbandry inside Khumbu (30).

The second traditional use of the animals is for milk. Various milk-products including curd, ghee, whey, cheese, and *chhurpi*—dry cheese—are common in Khumbu. Besides being an ingredient of the daily meal, ghee is of special importance for offering at monasteries, lighting votive lamps, and

for using as an ingredient in *shu-chya*, a special variety of mountain tea supposed to help people fight cold and altitude sickness. Kima Sherpa, a respondent also mentions the use of leather derived from dead animals for making various products. However, leather did not develop as prominent product in Khumbu.

About the mode of rearing, most respondents highlight the impact of seasonal changes. When the agricultural or tourism seasons are off, they say the animals are usually left in the wild to graze on their own and find their own shelters. Several families shift their ranches up the hill in summer and bring the animals down to lower pastures in winter, when the highlands are covered with snow. As animals are sensitive to altitude and temperature, a de-facto territorialization has resulted in Khumbu. For example, mules are confined to lower altitudes, say below Namche, while the mountains above it is the yak's zone. *Jyokpoes*, however, prevail in all heights above Lukla. Cows are also divided as *aule gai*, meaning cows of the lower altitudes, and *lek gai*—the cows of the higher altitudes. Pulmi Sherpa, who hails from Okhaldhunga, a district at a lower height compared to Solu-Khumbu mentions “*aule gai*” among her livestock. In an interview, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa explains underlying reasons that led to the territorialization of Khumbu in according with the animal's presence:

There is a clear division of work among mules and *jyokpoes*, maybe because of biological reasons. Mules can go only as high as 3,440 meters, while *jyokpoes* can go higher, say up to Everest Base Camp (6,364 meters). Yaks survive only in high altitude, say above Namche. If they come down to the lowlands, they suffer from heat or leeches. Because animals behave differently in different altitudes, Khumbu has defined zones where these animals perform best. The mules are confined to lower altitudes, say below Namche, above which the yaks and the *jyokpoes* take over. Mules are also notorious for polluting the trail with their dung; so, people above Namche do not prefer to see them.

My personal observations confirm that mules are not allowed above Namche while no yaks are seen below. *Jyokpoes* thrive above Lukla right up to Everest Base Camp. Horses are rarely seen carrying loads; most of them are used to ferry people, especially those who cannot walk well, or are in need of emergency rescues and cannot afford a helicopter.

Of late, animals are also seen with insurance tags on their ears, suggesting that they are well cared for. There is a government-run “Veterinary and Animal Care Center” in Salleri. However, no such centers are available inside proper Khumbu. This reflects a comparative neglect of the animals' health from the state's side, though the local people have been found doing the best they can to keep their animals fit and fine.

When asked about their feelings for the animals, most respondents claim they deeply love their livestock. Some of them claim of giving human-like treatment to their animals. Tashi Lama and Doma Sherpa claim they treat the animals whenever they are sick. Pulmu Sherpa asserts that the care continues throughout the animals' life until fate claims their lives ultimately: “Even if animals are sick, we treat them until they are alive. If they die of their own, that is their fate” (personal interview). People in Khumbu celebrate the existence of animals in their lives. Mules, yaks and *jyokpoes* are seen beautifully decorated with paints and garlands. Most of them have jingling bells hanging from their necks. The jinglingly of their neck-bells called “kalting” (metal bell) or “trilbu” (brass bell) is a perennial music one can hear in Khumbu (Lakpa Norbu 92).

Rarely vocal about the affective grounds for their love for animals, most of the Sherpas foreground Buddhist prescriptions as directive principles of their treatment of the animals. Thus, Buddhism appears as a cognitive foundation for their care for the animals, especially their abstention from killing and meat-eating. Of the interviewees, Tashi Lama Sherpa, Doma Sherpa, Pulmu Sherpa, Kima Sherpa, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa and Ramesh Kulung consider killing animals a sinful act. All of them cite Buddhist prescription as a preventive provision. “We are Buddhists; we do not ourselves kill animals,” says Tashi Lama Sherpa, exhibiting his awareness of the religious expectation, though he cannot pinpoint the exact provisions and the underlying philosophies. Ramesh Kulung, an animal herd, also thinks harming and killing animals is a source of sin: “We use them for carrying loads, but we don't kill them for meat. We don't like that. It's a kind of sin, you know. Even thinking so is sinful” (Kulung). Doma Sherpa, however, is aware of the Buddhist concept of *beyuls*—sacred hidden

valleys—inside which one is supposed to conduct in a righteous manner: “We don’t kill animals. It is not allowed inside a *beyul*. . . . I am a vegetarian; I don’t eat meat. Others are also aware that saving others’ life is important” (Doma Sherpa). Pulmu Sherpa re-echoes the Buddhist appeal that not even an insect should be killed by stepping on it: “We are Buddhists; we know we don’t take others’ lives. We love our animals as much as we love human beings. We chant, “*Om mani padme hum* . . .” all the time. This mantra prevents us from killing and harming others. Our Lamas also say we should not kill even insects. All living beings have the same soul. We have to respect one another’s existence in this universe” (Pulmu Sherpa). Kima Sherpa hinges on a popular community belief that killing or hurting an animal might invite sin and become counterproductive to the perpetrator: “We never kill animals. We believe that if we do, we are cursed by God, and we may even die. This is written in Buddhist texts, and Sherpa people faithfully follow it”

Alongside their belief in Buddhism, several Sherpas also cite uniquely Sherpa beliefs, sustained by tales and hearsays, that regard animals as powerful, divine, and sacred. Yeti is one of such examples. Though considered a mythical animal with no scientific instances of its existence or spotting, the Sherpas unquestionably believe in its existence, its holiness, and its power to bring good or bad results. In an interview, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa also hinges on such popular beliefs and tales that inspire the Sherpas to regard animals as holy beings:

Animals are very much present in the religious and cultural imaginations of the Sherpas. For example, there is a mountain that looks like someone riding a horse. People believe it’s a deity mounting a horse, and so they worship it. It’s in Tobuche. They also regard the horse as sacred for the same reason. They believe that if a horse is misused by the locals, they will get sick. Nevertheless, there are people who use horses to move up to Everest Base Camp.

There also are other Sherpa tales that provide an alternative explanation of human-animal relationship. Several of their deities are depicted with accompanying animals. Miyolangsangma, the Goddess believed to be living on Everest top, for example, is depicted riding a tiger. Khumbila, another deity, is depicted riding a horse. Nimi Sherpa does not rule out a Buddhist connection of such tales as well: “We have several stories and tales that demonstrate such relationships. If you closely read Buddhist literature, you will find many animal-related folktales and stories. Buddhism doesn’t allow misbehaving with any living creatures” (Nimi Sherpa).

The presence of animals in the collective imagination of the Sherpas drags the human-animal relationship to wild animals as well, and the Sherpas regard even wild animals as sentient beings, like their domestic animals. Kima Sherpa says, “We love and protect both wild and domestic animals,” extending the circumference of the relationship beyond the domestic animals. Besides Buddhism, the wild Khumbu ecosystem that has had animals, birds and the human close to one another for a long time make them close associates. Nimi Sherpa confesses: “Even wild animals like deer, bear, mountain cow, and stag, and birds like wild hen and Himalayan monal used to come very close to human settlement. People and animals have always lived close to each other in Khumbu.” A counterpoint, however, deserves a mention here. Despite the religious prescriptions against meat-eating, there are people even inside the Sherpa community who eat meat, and there are cases of poaching animals or even deliberately butchering the domestic livestock. These cases, however, are not socially or religiously approved. They take place against the Sherpas’ community ethics.

Despite the love, care and high regard for the animals, the natives of Khumbu cannot do without employing the animals for various purposes discussed earlier. Considering the tough topography of Khumbu, the employment may sound a little coercive. The grooms are also seen whipping and beating the animals to obey, and they include those who are old, sick and injured. This predicament is encapsulated in the word “*badhyata*” (obligation) Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa mentions, and almost all other respondents implicitly acknowledge.

The obligation understandably is mutual. While the animals give milk and wool to the humans and help them in agriculture and transport of goods, the animals give them protection, shelter and care. The obligations, posed by inhospitable terrain and climes in Khumbu cut across both the parties, and both are subject to circumstantial specificities. After centuries of domestication, these animals can no longer stay in the wild on their own; they need human patronage. On the other hand,

humans also need them especially when no road connects their villages, and there is no alternative means for transportation of goods including items of daily needs.

It is this discourse of obligation that connects the mutual and apparently conflicting existence of the human and the animals with the Buddhist concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*, or the doctrine of dependent origination. Why the animals are there in such an inhospitable and uneasy terrain like the one found in Khumbu is, accordingly to this principle, an outcome of a series of conditions, including the *karmic* effect to the merits they had earned in their previous births. This is consistent with Harvey's interpretation of the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda*: "This state of conditionality, that all things, mental and physical, arise and exist due to the presence of certain conditions, and cease once their conditions are removed" (65). Thus, there is no escape from the predicaments. Even the Sherpas, who perpetrate the coercion or irrational use of the animals are themselves subjects of dependent origination, and they respond to their predicaments with whatever resources are available to their disposal. Thus, free choice of agency does not have much to do with their actions.

The humans, who both care for and overuse the animals are themselves existential beings, cut in a web of difficulties. Khumbu is not an easy clime to survive. The movement for survival up and down the dangerous, steep, and often snow-covered terrain is not easy for human beings too. They also suffer as the animals do, as fatigue, thirst, hunger, and potential altitude sickness, and the persistent danger of slippage and fatal fall from the cliffs cling to them. In this condition, the people do not enjoy the comparative edge of being masters to the animals they groom. They are equally caught in the web of dependent origination, unaware where their liberation is, and are equally subjected to *dukkha*, the inevitable suffering: "The abstract principle [of *pratītyasamutpāda*] expresses the general pattern found in series of conditioned and conditioning links (*nidana*), culminating in the arising of *dukkha*, with *dukkha* ending when these cease" (65). They do not, however cease as long as "spiritual ignorance" persists (Harvey 66). Such spiritual ignorance, defined by Harvey as "deep-seated misconception of reality" anchors a being to immediate conditions, and inspires to accept *dukkha* as inevitable. Only one who gains nirvana—the antonym of spiritual ignorance—is likely to achieve transcendence from *dukkha*. It is less likely both animals and their grooms or attendants in Khumbu, who lack the facility of meditating and awakening to enlightenment, given the conditions they are in. Thus, *dukkha* becomes a persistent part of their reality, and their actions are accommodated within the brackets of such *dukkha*. They neither imagine nor try to liberate themselves from it. The people internalize their lot as a *karmic* effect and see the predicament of their animals in the same light. The *badhyata*, Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa mentions, echoes similar understanding.

The Khumbu-like conditionality is also spotted in many other locations. However, what makes Khumbu a special context for studying human-animal relationship is the underlying compassion that underpins this relationship constantly. The Sherpas, who are Buddhists by religion, constantly hinge on the Buddhist concept of *karuna*—compassion—for others. They specially evoke the concept of "*sattvartha-kriya*" defined as the ethics of "working for the welfare of beings through active help for them" (Harvey 153). Founded on this very doctrine, the Buddhist refrain from hurting, injuring or killing another sentient being, thereby exercising pity on everyone else: "Ah, there should be great pity for those adrift in the flood of suffering, who, although miserable in this way, do not recognize their wretched situation" (Shantideva 134). The animals, who can be rightfully recognized as beings who do not even recognize their wretched situation, therefore, deserve pity and care from human beings. Another reason why the Buddhist show compassion to others is that compassion has been recognized as one of the basic virtues of the bodhisattva: "the ideal being every Buddhist aspires to become" (Pagel 125). Buddhism also promises "high rebirth" for those who are compassionate and ensure them "further progress on the path to liberation up to the stage of non-return" (126). Thus, aspiration for the attainment of nirvana, and liberation from the *karmic* cycle of birth and death make the Buddhist compassionate towards everyone, including animals.

Although the ordinary Sherpas cite sin, God's verdict, and their religion's prescriptions as reasons for compassionate behavior towards their animal over and above the compulsive conditionality of existence, the scriptural explanation lie in the Buddhist doctrine of

pratītyasamutpāda and the Mahayana concept of *karuna*. These two concepts, thus, explain the compulsive use and permission of coercion of animals in Khumbu, and the compassion their owners exercise over and above their use.

Conclusion

Human lifeline in Khumbu and its vicinity is not possible without the use of animals—mules, yaks, *gyokpoes*, and horses. They carry loads, provide milk, wool, and manure, and help in ploughing fields. In a region where there are no at all or only scanty roads, they form the core resource for transportation. Animals are also a part of the Sherpas' collective imagination present in their stories, myths and religious tales, and thus regarded as sacred. While Sherpa Buddhism and cultural imagination dictate them to refrain from killing and torturing animals, the people cannot help using these animals within a permissible limit of employment and coercion. The compulsion is explained by the Buddhist concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* that recognizes a compulsory cause-and-effect relationship in the existence of every being and explain their predicaments as conditionalities that compulsorily entail *dukkha*, or suffering unless they gain spiritual consciousness and attain nirvana. As nirvana is not within the easy reach of the animals and the animal-rearing laities in Khumbu, they live through *dukkha*. What ameliorates this *dukkha* in Khumbu—perhaps a unique condition there—is the Mahayana doctrine of *karuna*, meaning compassion, considered one of the several *apramana* or the immeasurable virtues people need to cultivate to become bodhisattva, make progress in this life, and attain a condition of non-return to the web of life after death. *Karuna*, by corollary, makes people compassionate to the animals, and prevent them from killing or hurting them beyond the permissible limit. Thus, optimum use for work and resources, and compassionate behavior toward them makes animals' life in Khumbu equitable, and human-animal relationship becomes symbiotic. The inference demonstrates how the primary Buddhist doctrines redefine animal-human relationship. It presents an alternative perspective to the study of sustainable ecology, symbiosis, and interdependence. It inspires further research on similar provisions in other religions schools, or extension of similar research outside Khumbu. It also presents a way to look at human relationship with other beings: birds, trees, insects, or every living or even non-living being.

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