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Servants of Ganesh: Humans, Elephants, and Landscapes in Nepal

In the jungles of the Chitwan National Park in Nepal's lowland Tarai region, men dedicate themselves to a life lived with incarnations of the Hindu god Ganesh, reproducing an age-old, yet ever developing tradition of embodied skills and expert knowledge. Where once these men from Nepal's low status ethnic groups served the state by capturing elephants for export and by riding them on lavish hunting expeditions and ceremonial occasions, today they use their expertise in support of anti-poaching patrols, biodiversity conservation, and ecotourism. Playing a crucial role in the preservation of charismatic megafauna like tiger and rhino, and according to their respective ranks and roles, men live together in the total institution of the *hattisar*, or elephant stable, sharing an intimacy with their elephant companions that their profession denies them their own families.

Servants of Ganesh is a more-than-human ethnography not only of a distinctive form of animal husbandry that extends far back into antiquity, but also of an intimate, ritually regulated relationship between two types of person, only one of which happens to be human. Unlike existing literature, this study of human-elephant relations explores elephant handling practice in its social, cultural, and historical context, recognizing the mutualities that bind human and elephant together as they roam across a landscape marked by the traces of human- elephant activity. *Servants of Ganesh* reveals the lived experience of expert practitioners and their sacred companions in terms of their agency, their understandings, and the identity derived from living and working together as part of a multispecies occupational community. Providing a privileged insight into the lifeworld of Nepal's elephant handlers through the author's own apprenticeship, *Servants of Ganesh* shows how handlers variably understand their elephants as animals, as persons, and as gods, and in so doing exemplifies the virtues of anthropology's experiential insistence on active participant observation.