THE MASS KILLING of stray dogs in Bangalore in early 2007 shocked and horrified the veteran Indian journalist Hiranmay Karlekar. What happened to the dogs, he writes, “will remain part of the stream of savagery that flows through history.” The massacre inspired him to write a book that “would explore the entire cultural and psychological territory of human aggression in the light of our attitude toward stray dogs.”

Having grown up in a family that loved dogs, most of them strays that his mother took in and found homes for, Karlekar has always had “family members with four legs and a tail.” He dedicates the book to the memory of two of them, Zorba and Lara, who were “my constant companions while this book was being written.”

The tragic death of two children in Bangalore reportedly mauled to death by stray dogs was what unleashed “Operation Dog Hunt,” a government pogrom against the local dog population. The author’s sobering account of the campaign in a chapter called “The Killing Fields of Karnataka” earns the book the first half of its title — “Savage Humans.”

Karlekar writes extensively about the twin sources of the human/animal divide in Western thought — the Judeo-Christian religious tradition and Greco-Roman humanism as revived during the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. Then, through the lens of psychology and animal studies, he examines man’s unique talent for aggressiveness, cruelty, and destruction, citing the work of authors such as Erich Fromm, Konrad Lorenz, Paul Waldau, and Desmond Morris. He leaves no doubt that when it comes to man and the other animals, dogs or otherwise, the most aggressive and dangerous killer on the planet is man. “No dog has ever been responsible for the slaughter of six million Jews,” he writes.

But what puts this book in a class by itself is Karlekar’s discussion of the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita and Brahma Sutras and other Vedantic/Hindu texts to find out what they have to say about the human/animal divide.

After a brief discussion of dharma and karma, the author examines the creation accounts of the Judeo-Christian and Vedantic traditions to probe the difference between Hindu and Western attitudes toward animals. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is the architect and builder of the heavens and earth and everything else. Since he stands apart from what he created, he is outside Nature, not part of it.

When God creates man in his own image, he also sets him apart from Nature and other “living creatures” as well (Gen. 1:26-27). God then gives man his marching orders: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28).

“Dominion” may sound benign, but it isn’t. The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham preferred to call it by another name: tyranny. “The day may come,” he wrote, “when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny.”

After God’s six-day work week was over, he rested and gave himself a pat on the back for a job well done: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31). There’s no hint in Genesis where God came from. He’s just there from the beginning.

The Supreme Being of Hinduism, Brahma, is not outside of Nature. “Brahman pervades every thing that exists, living and nonliving,” writes Karlekar. “Everything is Him.” This monistic worldview is in marked contrast to the dualities and hierarchical thinking in Western thought.

In Hinduism the human/animal divide is barely a divide at all. Its scriptures provide many examples of species crossovers: a fish giving birth to two human babies, a snake king, people who are turned into crocodiles and Hindu gods who impregnate animals as well as humans. In the Ramayana, for example, Hunamana, who’s a devotee of Rama, is the offspring of the wind god and Anjana, a beautiful monkey. To banish
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mistreatment of animals in India, including the horrors of vivisection. In his opinion — and as a member of the Animal Welfare Board of India he should know — the use and abuse of animals in research, entertainment, food and commerce is getting steadily worse.

He describes the plight of thousands of captive elephants, forced to live in chains and isolated from each other, as “pathetic.” Rented out to religious festivals, they're made constantly to travel on hot tar roads up to 40 kilometers a day and stand for as long as 16 to 24 hours at a stretch during temple ceremonies. This exploitation of elephants and other animals is all the more reprehensible because there are animal welfare laws on the books, but state and municipal governments routinely ignore them.

Karlekar does not mince words when it comes to the gulf between Hindu principles and practices. Nobody treats animals more savagely than Hindus, he writes, as exemplified “by the composition of the crowds in Bangalore and elsewhere in Karnataka, who demanded the mass killing of stray dogs and cheered lustily as they were cornered, brutalized and savagely hurled with vicious force into vans that took them to the killing grounds.”

He maintains that animals would fare better in India and in Asia generally if people adhered more faithfully to the values of their religious and spiritual traditions. Killing stray dogs and other acts of cruelty to animals is “a result of the abandonment by the bulk of the Hindus of the inclusive worldview of the Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Puranas and by the Buddhists and Jains of the compassionate messages of their faiths.”

It is hoped that this powerful and important book will be a wake-up call to the people of India, Asia and beyond and that the issues it raises will be widely discussed.