

BUMPY ROADS, DUSTY AIR: *Gadbad* and the Sensate Ecologies of Driving Work in Contemporary Mumbai

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“This is the everyday-everyday mess [*roz-roz ka gadbad*] the summer and rain make to the traffic and roads,” sighs Mumbai taxi driver Rashid as we bump to a halt at a busy city junction.¹ Rashid is a veteran Mumbai taxi *wallah*, from a family of hereditary, Muslim taxi drivers and mechanics known as *chillia*. His family has been driving in Mumbai’s *gadbad* for more than ninety years, so for Rashid, his sons, and nephews, the chronic navigation of *gadbad* marks an intergenerational experience of urban work. Rashid waves at the driver pulled up next to him, who nods back acknowledging their shared entanglement in *gadbad*. Rashid cocks his head to look down the throng of cars in front of him, three of which are immobile, stalled, and steaming as their drivers pour drinking water into the dark reservoir under the open bonnets to cool off wheezing radiators. Several taxi drivers scramble out of their cars to help with the steamy examination and offer scalding water to quench the smoldering machinery. Their calloused, cracked feet, nestled in scuffed plastic sandals, stumble as they trade the spring of the clutch and break for the hard resistance of the road. An ensemble of arms that usually spend their days bent along leathery steering wheels extend with rapid relief into the blazing morning to wave the most impatient cars through the *gadbad*. These arms flaunt scratches, scabs, urban dust, peeling sunburn, perspiration, and city grime. These

embodied marks of *gadbad*'s unavoidable ecological onslaught,² and drivers' ethical orientations to social and sensory survival in an inevitably toxic future, prove central here. As I will illustrate, on the roads these ethical orientations emerge through drivers' labor amid the sensory and the ecological city. I call these tensions between the labor of the senses and the ecologies of the city *sensate ecologies*. My conceptualization of sensate ecologies takes ecological navigation as a particular kind of skill and expertise that orients to social and ecological relations rather than just to the object of work itself.³ Driving work, like many forms of labor, is both sensory and ecological (Blanchette 2020; Nair 2021; Parreñas 2018). However, it is also work tied closely to the car, itself an object of ecological degradation, and part of a global industry in flux and *gadbad* of its own (del Nido 2021).

In hereditary driving work the lines between generations of perpetrators of ecological harm and those who face the harm have blurred. For drivers like Rashid, this is why forbearance in the face of ecological and infrastructural harm and *gadbad* develops as labor *expertise* rather than as *resistance* or environmental protest. Sensory knowledge and expertise therefore cannot be dismissed (as is common) as mere survivalism, nor theorized as "resistance" or "resilience" in the face of ecological destruction. Instead, understanding drivers' lives through ecologies such as smog, air, road debris, heat, and urban foliage—which they have a place in creating—illustrates how working people sensorially work *with* and *in* the world around them rather than against it.

What I describe here as *chillia* drivers' sensate ecological relations with a difficult city—a condition of *gadbad* usually considered ecologically and infrastructurally unsustainable—calls into question many assumptions about ecological damage and precarious urban life. *Chillia* drivers rarely deny environmental and infrastructural onslaughts that surround driving work or the physiological debilitation that decades of driving work wreaks on their bodies. Yet they also refuse the easy narratives of damage, crisis, unsustainability, epochal disaster, and labor precarity that usually accompany discussions about the environment and working-class labor in the Global South.⁴ Eve Tuck (2009) highlights this when she calls for *suspending damage* as a stand against the dominant scholarly appetite for damage that motivates research on indigenous communities.⁵ Arguably, a corresponding, if not analogous approach to damage and violence also commonly enters scholarly approaches to Muslim and working-class life in contemporary India.⁶ Yet Tuck argues that no matter how disenfranchised people are, they are not depleted, ruined, and helpless, and they do not wish to be seen that way. Tuck calls instead for other forms of critique that challenge the burdens of damage that disenfranchised com-

munities carry (see [Murphy 2017](#)). As [Max Liboiron \(2021\)](#) and [Michelle Murphy \(2017\)](#) argue in the context of polluted land and water, suspending damage constitutes a critical, decolonizing position. When people refuse narratives of damage and insist on alternative ethical positions, they say something important about their desires and their capacities to shape their lives. We need to listen, and once we suspend our appetite for damage, we can attend to ethical positions that really matter to our interlocutors. [Murphy \(2017\)](#) refers to this possibility as “alterlife.” Alterlife does not deny the toxicity of existing formations—or in the case of *chillia* drivers, relations of urban inequality that underlie the onslaught of *gadbad*—but rather focuses on the ethical, sensorial, and labor practices that encompass *all* the social and ecological relations that people are in, including the toxic ones.⁷ For example, even if we agree that cars are polluting, that pollution is harmful, that a lifetime of driving work takes a serious toll on bodies, as well as taking place in difficult living and political conditions, polluted ecologies can and do foster “good relations” ([Liboiron 2021](#)).⁸ For *chillia* drivers, these ecological onslaughts and *gadbad* are what connect them to one another and to their city.

GADBAD AND MULTISENSORY LABOR

Gadbad is a term that spans several South Asian languages, but is not easily translated, not least because it constitutes an emergent social category that depends on one’s location. It can mean muddle, mess, confusion, disorder, or disquiet; for drivers, it can also mean ecological and infrastructural breakdown. Yet *gadbad* is only possible or knowable when you are in it with other people or when you sense the disquiet with others. As [Sara Ahmed \(2006, 7–9\)](#) reminds us, as we orient ourselves to the world, we only know which way to turn once we know where we are. For drivers, *gadbad* is not a singular event but a chronic way of encountering and sensing the city together—what Rashid refers to as *roz-roz*, or everyday-everyday. For Rashid, *gadbad* is the pervasive ecological and infrastructural chaos that he experiences as a man finding his way through Mumbai’s roads. However, the familiarity of the morning’s collective chaos and nods and waves of solidarity suggest that Rashid’s experience is not confined to an individual or subjective one. Instead, it is mediated through multisensory and shared understandings among men who drive for a living on Mumbai’s roads.

Undoubtedly, ecological effects have some universal dimensions, but the sensate orientations required to labor in a city’s ecology, to navigate *gadbad*, have situated social logics. The sensory anthropologist [David Howes \(2022\)](#) rightly insists that we approach each society on its own sensory terms ([Classen 1993](#)). Driving

is all about *gadbad*, and mediating *gadbad* requires various kinds of labor, not least, as *chillia* drivers show us, a labor of the senses. Timothy Choy's (2011) invitation to think of how ecology functions as a gathering of several senses proves useful here. The taxi-driving profession consists of the literal labors of driving, clutch, and steering, coupled with the more nebulous labor of the senses. Working and living on and in the roads, bridges, dust, sludge, grime, horns, and road debris necessitates significant sensory and social labor.⁹ As we see in the tangle that began this essay, living in *gadbad* means to live in a multisensory world shared by others who live and work with you. Hereditary taxi driving is a profession that animates relations between the senses, and between the senses and their public, social, and ecological worlds.¹⁰ It forces a departure from centering the individual ecological experience or a single sense as the subject of social and labor theory and asks to join the recent discussions that connect privatized understandings of embodied and phenomenological experience and its multisensory, socially mediated aspects (Cekaite and Goodwin 2021; Howes 2003; Desjarlais 2003).¹¹ Through this focus on sensate ecologies I rearticulate categories of fixity in both labor and urban theory. I move the discussion of the urban away from spaces, scales, class, labor, precarity, and ecological damage to focus instead on the urban labor experience of ecological onslaught, orientation, anticipation, movement, and collective sensing.

Clearly *roz-roz ka gadbad* could be just another traffic jam on a very hot day because we have come to expect and complain about both heat and jams in cities like Mumbai. However, for taxi drivers like Rashid, the mess of the weather, the heat, the howls, the waves, and the jams—*gadbad*—is where and how he and others like him live, work, and perceive (Liboiron 2021). Indeed, Rashid's acceptance and skilled navigation of *gadbad* marks how driving labor orients itself to work, and how other labor like cleaning, repair, detours, and resting make a collective, sensory, working life.¹² In other words, *gadbad* and what to do in it seems collectively familiar, and orients drivers to something akin to what Ahmed (2006, 7) calls a *home*. For Ahmed, to be *oriented* is not simply to find one's way; it also indicates how one's body comes to feel at home with others. Home emerges as a social rather than a purely spatial or phenomenological realm. For drivers it is how they to live *in* and *with* the world rather than against it. Not least, for the rest of us, it illuminates a much wider range of active social possibilities in the contemporary world—perhaps we all live and will live in *gadbad*. But how we make a home there is the significant question.¹³

Undoubtedly, the experience of traffic tangles is not unique to Mumbai; nor are the ecological travails of urban workers. In empirical terms, perhaps *gadbad* is

everywhere and all labor encounters the debilitations of *gadb*. Something about Rashid's sensorial orientation to *gadb* and recognition of its sociality suggests that it is more than a temporally constrained event of sitting in traffic jams on a busy morning. Instead, for those who spend most of their days driving, *gadb* is chronic. It is both a place to be *in* and an orientation to urban life and work—it has no clear boundaries of beginning or end. As Rashid describes it, *gadb* is not simply a local description for what drivers see in front of them, but rather a social category that captures the multisensory aspects of urban work on roads. It creates socialities and even sensory pleasures where they did not exist before.¹⁴ *Gadb* also departs from the common discussions about roads and driving in Western contexts—such as those concerning rush hour, traffic jams, infrastructural breakdown, or poor road and transportation planning—and from their accompanying orientations toward destination, speed, and efficiency. *None* of these debates *fully* apprehend *gadb*.

As I take this situation of *gadb* as an invitation to understand the sensorially mediated experience of driving labor, two points matter. First, recent scholarship on urban ecologies argues that ecologies are not stable or bounded matter. Instead, they defy compartmentalization into strictly ecological, “natural,” or infrastructural domains (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013) and repeatedly spill into the social. Relatedly, multisensory anthropology understands the senses as made and malleable through life and living, rather than given and contained in individual bodies or subjects. I especially focus on how this collective orientation of driving labor to its ecological and sensorial relations—sensate ecologies—comes to feel like home through several aspects of driving work (driving, repair, cleaning, resting, and even prayer).

Through fieldwork with hereditary taxi drivers, I show how drivers work with and in this ecological world. I analytically decouple ecological critiques of destruction, harm, and unsustainability wrought by cars and driving from a discussion of what life lived and sustained around automobiles looks like. When we understand urban ecological relations with those who work and live in sensate ecologies—in bumpy roads, dusty air, and *gadb*—rather than through environmental and ecological science, we see that even bad ecological conditions can produce coexistence and sustainable relations. For *chillia*, driving is social, *sensate work* rather than just travel and transport. Proximity to ecologies such as dust, air, and noise prove threatening in the embodied sense; they debilitate and damage bodies. Yet they also expand and sustain the capacity to continue to work in a family trade and to exercise collective ethical norms that promise dignity and forbearance—

what *chillia* drivers call *dhairya* (patience). Therefore, while I began here with an immersion in *gadbad*, which is both an ecological orientation (often an ecological nightmare) and a social/sensate one, I proceed to examine the implications of ethical and labor orientations such as *dhairya* toward this *gadbad*. I then move into the situated ecologies of driving work and broader urban life to illustrate the possibilities of sensorial and social pleasures in the midst of *gadbad*'s onslaughts.

DHAIRYA AS ECOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Waiting in traffic in Rashid's quivering *kaalipeeli* (black and yellow) taxi without air-conditioning I am drenched in Mumbai's soggy late summer. This morning, the crumbling road-rubble we left strewn behind us has snaked knots into my stomach. Bubbling, jet-black bitumen from a freshly paved side of the highway has glued itself to the wheels around us, spraying its familiar hydrogen chloride odor through our open windows. The vibrating car pulls the sweat behind Rashid's ear down his face and into his silvery beard; the intense, fetid petroleum odor of bitumen makes me instinctively cover my nose with my *dupatta*. Rashid's hardworking hands reach for his small towel. Instead of covering his nose in recoil from the odor as I do, he wipes his beard, and leans out of the window, inviting into the car the breeze that brings the chemical redolence closer but keeps the sweaty humidity at bay. In this life of everyday automobility and the regular onslaught of chemicals and climate, the mundane direction and ripple of the breeze adjudicates everything. As I sit with Rashid in the stench of bitumen and watch his relief at the breeze, several things strike me. First, it is through these mundane, sensate practices that drivers are oriented to urban ecologies that they do not see but rather breathe (Choy 2020), cough up, wipe, and cool off. Second this is how they make the difficult work they do bearable, even pleasurable.

While it is just past eleven in the morning, the intense heat soaring off the road's surface feels to me as though the blaze began an eternity ago and that it will radiate forever. For Rashid, who has driven these roads for decades, radiant heat probably feels inescapable, much like the skin he lives in. He catches me fanning myself with my soppy *dupatta* and commiserates wisely, "This highway is at least ten times hotter than anywhere else. Have *dhairya* [patience, strength]; when we cross Mahim Junction, you will feel a change. After the junction we can find a taxi stand under the trees at Mahim Church and you can buy a bottle of cold water from the regular *tapri* [tea stall] at the *naka* [cross-road] there."

Scientists know that paved road surfaces are hotter than other places and that paving techniques and materials differ in their capacity to absorb, radiate,

and repel ecological forces. However, Rashid's understanding of Mumbai's radiant heat, coupled with his steady advice for *dhairya*, is striking. It signals his everyday attunement to his work, to infrastructures he works in, and the labor of searching for urban ecologies of comfort, coolness, and shade. When I heard this call for *dhairya* from many *chillia* drivers, I understood it as a shared ethic toward difficult work. It helps Rashid navigate *gadbad* and conserves his diminishing resources of energy and bodily strength. Drivers' intentioned exercise of *dhairya* suggests that sensate ecologies are not simply what people are subjected to but rather something to which they collectively respond.¹⁵

Dhairya is a Gujarati and Hindi term for patience and endurance,¹⁶ but it also has a sensory, metaphorical, and ethical sensibility. When I asked Rashid what it meant, he responded that it signified a wellspring of strength and acceptance of the unavoidable—"do what you can because this is what is there to do and this is the city we live in," he said. He also reiterated that "*Dhairya* makes us *chillia*; it is a belief, but it is also what makes us original drivers, it is why everyone trusts us; we don't have accidents or fights on the road. We know the taxi business, but also know how to get around with *dhairya* in all this *gadbad* that is Bumbai." Rashid's lesson suggests that *dhairya* has developed as a practical concept available to *chillia* to speak of their ecological and ethical orientations to driving work. However, this orientation also provides *chillia* with what Webb Keane (2016) terms a "shared sense of living." It is striking that *dhairya* elides claims of resilience (Cons 2018), hope (Tsing 2015), or cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) for a livelihood that these men fail to recognize as harmful. In fact, few drivers claim to be resilient men. Most recognize that a lifetime of driving work means a chronic debilitation from which they will never recover. Yet most also continue to participate in the profession because it is a family trade and they see it as dignifying, ethical work. The oldest *chillia* drivers have accepted this weave between dignity and debilitation, between living as respectable men with worn-down, male bodies. We need to pay as close analytical attention to the social acceptance of these tensions between dignity and debilitation as we have to the logics of resilience and resistance in social theory. For example, Julie Peteet (2017) poignantly illustrates Palestinian forbearance in their use of the term *aisheen* (we are still living/breathing).¹⁷ *Aisheen* claims the life-affirming existence of breath in an otherwise unlivable world. In different circumstances, *dhairya* for *chillia* is both an ethical critique of the way things are and an acceptance of shared debilitation.

This suggests that *dhairya* concerns patience with road ecologies as much as patience with the wearing down of life and bodies in the course of gathering labor

expertise. It also constitutes a temporal challenge to the less patient, algorithmic efficiency of the new ride-share taxi industry.¹⁸ Often a *chillia* driver takes this position of *dhairya* to differentiate himself from others he encounters along the road who are always in haste. Bilal, another veteran driver, often smiled when a passenger had impatiently disembarked in the midst of a traffic jam to attempt to get to their destination on foot: “Passengers do *jaldbazi* [show haste and impatience] because they don’t understand the *gadbad* of the road system. Drivers know that *dhairya* is what is needed, otherwise we will all go mad. It’s OK; we all do what we can do.” Passengers enter *gadbad* instrumentally and intermittently to get somewhere else. For professional drivers, *gadbad* is *home* and therefore requires different ethical and pragmatic orientations. *Dhairya* is not an ecological orientation that measures time as urgency; rather it is expertise that *knows* what will happen in situations of urgency and masters what to do in conditions of ecological and urban onslaught. These distinct positions within the sensate ecologies of driving, between *dhairya* and *jaldbazi*, might explain many antagonisms over time and speed between the taxi industry and passengers.

As we sit in *gadbad* this morning, the bumps and intense chemical stench cause the dredges of milky tea I had for breakfast to tickle upward as an unpleasant, but familiar sense of car-sickness. For Rashid, the concrete dust from the crumble, what drivers call *dhooli* (dust), and the pungent chemical odor grates at his chronically dusty, rusty throat. He lets out that practiced growl that catches just the right part of his throat to clear the immediate irritation. The frequent, guttural growls from the union of Mumbai’s dusty crumble and Rashid’s rusty throat provide a comfortable fellowship between us on these otherwise speechless rides. Yet as I struggle with my rolling stomach, nausea, and irritation with the heat, traffic, and pungent acidity of bitumen, Rashid remains focused and calm. Taxi drivers like Rashid live amid urban ecological onslaughts they do not control. Yet Rashid has kept coming back with his old, vibrating car to the jam, smog, haze, and noise for decades. This is his livelihood; he is compelled to do this to live. By most measures of household economics, *chillia* are poor people, living on a daily income in a cash economy. However, without denying these constraints of necessity, *chillia* drivers routinely regaled me, less with stories of wretched precarity than with proud family biographies (Bedi 2022) of migration into Bombay and the development of expertise in the transport trades. They were stories fueled by a desire to participate in the world of twentieth-century mobility and technological progress in which automobiles and the chaotic life of the city proved central.

Rashid knows the environmental debates over automobiles; he regularly hears that his car is old and polluting. He admits that driving in Mumbai takes an enormous toll on his body. When I first met Rashid in 2010, his arm glided up to the gearshift with the grace and experience of a maestro claiming the strings of his instrument. This morning, almost a decade later, his long, gaunt arm trembles tentatively to the gear, and it is difficult for him to control the twitch in his head and shoulders. In these years of progressing tremors, Rashid's car has also acquired new quivers and jerks, and they move around like brothers who have developed the same gait by living too long together in Mumbai's road crumble.

The automobile is a much-maligned and unsustainable mode of transport, central in global efforts to stem urban ecological degradation. Yet it is also the only means of sustaining a respectable and knowledgeable life that Rashid knows. Ironically, contemporary environmentalist debates over the automobile's sustainability are accompanied by the proliferation of automobilization throughout the Global South. A twenty-first-century urban theory of automobile lives will be less relevant in the region if it remains focused on damage and environmentalism (important as those are), rather than looking at the social and ecological life-making that driving in the *gadbad* of these places entails. We could benefit by turning from sustainability as an environmental question to the social question of how people sustain automobile livelihoods in shifting, difficult urban ecologies and chronic sensory excess. This is what Rashid's invocation of *dhairya* in the *gadbad* invites us to do.

CHILLIA DRIVERS AND AUTOMOBILE LIVES

Rashid's community of *chillia* have driven taxis since the early twentieth century, and they claim to be Bombay's original taxi drivers (Bedi 2021). Connections between *chillia* and the taxi trade can be traced to the early twentieth century when *chillia* families began migrating to Bombay from the Palanpur region in Gujarat. They began as drivers of horse-drawn Victorias and later moved to the motorized trade. *Chillia* are Sunni Muslims of the Momin caste.¹⁹ When I asked what it meant to be original, drivers responded that an original driver had a long-term connection to the taxi trade and an originary, sensory knowing of Bombay's ecologies and topographies—or as Rashid said, “original is someone who does not need a map.” *Chillia* stories of urban migration are marked by desires to form part of Bombay's urban world and a sensibility that urban life heightens social worlds. Not least, they joined the world of dust, potholes, bodily pain, waiting, traffic, police, bureaucracy, and knowledge of the city's ecologies. Therefore, originality has tem-

poral, sensorial, and knowledge-gathering dimensions. For Rashid, it also means the capacity to know and navigate *gadbad*.

Hereditary taxi drivers show us what an ecology of urban automobile life looks and feels like when we separate it from debates over the automobile's place in environmental destruction. Indeed, while polluting things like cars or plastics, as Liboiron (2021) eloquently argues, can be environmentally “bad,” attention to sensate life brings to light ecological, social, and ethical relations forged around them. People regularly make good lives in ecologies that surround automobiles and in those that are produced through the “externalities” (Callon 1998, 22) of automobile life. Externalities are effects of ecologically “bad” things but are borne most heavily by those who spend the most time in their cars, and who in turn become experts at finding ways to live with them.

Rashid makes a meaningful life gathering ecological knowledge not just through driving but also through encounters with externalities such as dust, noise, smog, and uneven chemical topographies that constitute the shared worlds of driving work. For Rashid, *gadbad* makes the world knowable. For instance, at first, Rashid's habituated, guttural response to humidity, smog, concrete, and chemicals that emit through Mumbai's atmosphere, and the bumpy snakes of nausea that take over my body are signs of the escalating degradation of environment and infrastructure. Taxi driving in Mumbai, especially in old, open taxis like Rashid's, necessitates this kind of exposure. It exposes drivers to and produces environmental degradation and pollution, and it wears down the built environment and infrastructure. Yet there is something oxymoronic about being *in* a car that is also open to the world (Ingold 2008). Mumbai taxi drivers are *in* cars, but they also live and work in the *open*. Looking at driving work from this open world provides a different perspective from those that approach the automobile as a private place of individuated freedom, aspiration, and social mobility.

I frequently listened to *chillia* explain themselves to transport authorities who tried to convince them to give up their collectively owned taxis, purchase newer cars, or join ride-share companies to make their lives more physically and environmentally comfortable. Rashid's common response went something like this:

If there is one thing about being an original *chillia* driver in Mumbai it is this—you have knowledge of roads and of politics and you have dignity because your feet are on the ground and you have the freedom to put your head anywhere and anytime it is time for *namaaz* [Muslim prayer] or rest. The ground is shaky, of course, but everyone else can manipulate the software to

send their drivers to the moon, but *chillia* drivers are here on the roads and in the city. Roads are jammed and painful, but I will take the city any day rather than be manipulated to fly to the moon.

Rashid's retort is telling. First, drivers do not experience ecological *gadbhad* in any simple way as damage. *Chillia* acknowledge difficulty and messiness, but yet, *dhairya* in these conditions provides a sense of collective determination and action, what Tuck (2009, 416) calls a desire-based rather than a damage-centered way of living. For Rashid, it is desire for freedom over work time and piety, and to remain grounded rather than aspirational in this difficult world. It also signals an acceptance that worldly and ecological realities are intertwined with pious ones. It is striking that Rashid does not respond to the environment as a system of "problems" that need to be solved. Instead, he stresses a coexistence and acceptance of the existing order of the world he faces.²⁰ This order connects pious Muslims to god and all earthly things that have their feet and heads on the ground, even if this order and ground are troubled and messy. *Chillia* drivers are less concerned with an environmental critique of degradation, or with aspirations to the moon, than they are with making *inhabitable worlds* (Langwick 2018). Tiffany Lethabo King's (2016, 1022–23) definition of fungibility is useful here to highlight how laboring bodies suffer environmental and political onslaughts of work at the same time that they find possibilities of sustainable life-making.

Auto-mobile work is sustainable because it is shared, and allows for a coexistent life.²¹ In the spirit of Islamic principles of coexistence and equitable accumulation, most *chillia* taxis are collectively owned. Often, one taxi supports up to eighteen people across households. Most *chillia* prefer to drive older, secondhand taxis manufactured by the Indian company Premier and known by the brand name of Premier Padmini. However, older cars are seen by police, commuters, and even transport unions (who are otherwise supportive of *chillia's* self-employed, hereditary status) as belonging to backward and polluting men unwilling to keep up with a modern city.

When I first moved to live in the community of *chillia* drivers and mechanics in northern Mumbai that became my home for almost ten years, I was solely focused on practices of hereditary, urban work. But over a decade of fieldwork I could not ignore sensate connections between automobile labor and urban ecology. My fieldnotes are full of observations of coughing, clearing, spitting, dusting, and scraping the visible and invisible debris of ecological clutter that settles into and

onto bodies of professional drivers and cars. They are also full of detours in search of ecological relief such as urban shade, sea breezes, taxi stands, and *nakas*.

I now turn to these sensate ecologies, which constitute the coalescence between driving work, the labor of the senses, and ecologies of the city.



Figure 1. The social life of driving. Photo by Tarini Bedi.

AIR, HEAT, AND SHADE

Hafiz and Karim sit on the hoods of their taxis reading newspapers on a late May morning. Karim had returned from an early morning shift. He had suffered from a hacking cough for months. The smoggy days sitting in an open, idling car made his chest heave so much that he had to stop his car to catch his breath—“there is choke in this city, and most of it is in the air; once the rains come it will be better,” he said.

Hafiz agrees gently, “Karim *bhai* [brother], keep some *dhairya*; it always gets better. The rains will come soon.”

They both know that heavy monsoons between June and September will cleanse the smoggy choke for Karim and bring relief from heat. They know that monsoons are good for business when commuters don’t want to walk or stand out in the rain waiting for buses or trains. But they also know that monsoons pummel

Mumbai's roads into lumps of debris, spray through open windows drenching the seats and drivers, and splay Mumbai's sludge all over the car so that Karim has to wash himself and his car more often.

In summer, early morning drives are easier for Karim as he idles less and feels less assaulted by fumes and pollution. "I like to smell *bombil* [Bombay duck] drying on beaches or the fish from the morning's low tide rather than the evening's diesel fumes. It [the fishy] smell reminds me that there is a *samundar* [sea] somewhere. Everyone from Palanpur asks me about the *samundar* of Bumbai," Karim declares with a sense of delight that he can take stories of the seaside to his landlocked relatives in Palanpur.

Mumbai has distinct morning and evening smells, and drivers structure their days around which takes the least toll on their bodies, or around those that are redolent but comforting, like drying fish. "I prefer to wake up early than to choke," says Karim. "This way, my nephew, who has young children to support, can take the car for the full day. I need less money and less choke; he needs more money and since he is young, he will take a bit more time until he starts to suffer from this choke. This sharing of less choke and more choke works for all of us." The question of how to make a living when respiration is at stake is frequently discussed among drivers. Drivers perceive the atmosphere less in politico-legal terms of atmospheric citizenship (Ghertner 2020), and more as smells and matter that settle in the body to produce the sense of *choke*. Drivers rarely, if ever, use terms of environmental science, such as *pollution* or *toxins*. Instead, they express ecological relations with the city's air as choke. In his study of air pollution in Hong Kong, Timothy Choy (2011, 146) argues that there is no such thing as air in itself; rather, air is the aggregation of material and immaterial manifestations such as breath, humidity, viruses, particulate matter, smog, and more. For drivers, these coalesce as choke.

While smoggy air makes its presence felt in Karim's lungs and his hacking cough acknowledges this presence, the air is also where Karim and others are collectively immersed, and they engage multiple senses to practice temporal and self-regulation. Drivers devise new driving rhythms around the quality of the air as the seasons change, since the atmosphere, even as it is all-encompassing, is uncontrollable. Here, *dhairya* constitutes a way to control oneself and to share this capacity with others in this uncontrollable ecological state. This is why drivers routinely advise *dhairya* to anyone who shows sensate signs of suffering. Everyone experiences choke, but they experience it differently—*dhairya* promises to make all of it bearable.

In this atmospheric recalcitrance and unpredictability, drivers regulate their temporalities of driving through whiffs, breaths, and respiration, rather than solely through attention to infrastructural blockages, traffic flows, or rush hours. As Karim explained, he and his nephew swap driving shifts based on who is better equipped to take on respiratory assaults. This is traffic regulation and driving shifts organized and rooted in obligations that generations have to each other and determined through relative vulnerabilities to Mumbai's ecologies. Karim is obligated to support his deceased brother's son by allowing him more driving time; his nephew is obligated to face Mumbai's onslaught more fully by taking the later shift.

By 10 a.m. Karim is done for the day and his car is ready for cleaning before his nephew takes over. As he awaits cleaning, he sits with Hafiz, reading the newspaper on his car bonnet. Both Hafiz and Karim place small towels between their bodies and the hot, burnished metal. When the long wait for rides in the afternoon heat makes drivers drowsy, these towels are deftly rolled into pillows and placed on windshields or car seats for quick naps. Lines of taxis with open doors and the cracked, hardworking feet of resting drivers peeping out of one end form a part of the urban landscape of hot Mumbai afternoons. Driving in Mumbai is mobile work, but many of the sensory pleasures of movement are derived from the periods and places of rest that surround and punctuate it.

But rest does not come easily, and the pursuit of rest and waiting entails labors and *dhairya* of its own. Taxi driving in Mumbai involves a lot of waiting and sitting around outside. Finding a place to wait is difficult and requires planning and the envisioning of routes. Drivers look for street corners, official taxi stands, or sheltered, tree-lined slivers of road. These are spaces where they can avoid being fined by the traffic police for stopping. They are where they can rest their bodies between the battering, noisy, smoggy rides through the city, find some shade to eat in and nap for a while, or say their prayers. The searing sun and the urban heat are absorbed into Mumbai's built urban landscape. They are also absorbed into the metallic containers of cars. In Indian cities, middle-class complaints and talk about heat and rising temperatures are tied to a class critique of rapid urban growth and development (cf. [Frazier 2019](#)). Yet for drivers, urban heat is less a point of critique as a site for the accumulation of labor knowledge. In Mumbai's two key weather patterns—the heat and pounding monsoon—drivers require neither talk nor critique, but a shared strategy and sensory labor to get through it.

The search for shade from the blistering heat and humidity entails a circuitous search for shade of trees or sea breeze. For Karim and Hafiz, driving work

demands this thermal orientation in which considerations of heat, shade, dampness, and humidity become part of their decisions about roads and routes. Hafiz accepts afternoon rides when the sun is hottest only if they take him toward shaded parts of the city, where he can rest and complete his *namaaz* under the shade of trees. He searches for the baobab, *peepal*, or *karanj* trees in Dadar, Shivaji Park, Borivili, Navy Nagar, and Colaba—south, central, and northern points of a city with scarce publicly accessible shade. For transport planners, city routes are marked by roads, maps, and speed. For drivers who sit in hot, open cars all day, the route is marked by trees and breezes that promise shade, relief, and rest. The spaces of waiting also make for spaces of rest, and drivers prefer to rest where they are likely to know others who rest there with them (Figure 1). Rest is less about leisure than about work and the capacity to keep working. Significantly, the demands made by taxi drivers on the government are not only for better roads but also for better places of rest, and for places to regenerate sensorially—taxi stands and shade.



Figure 2. Resting. Photo by Tarini Bedi.

SENSATE TOPOGRAPHIES: Roads, *Nakas*, Debris

Hafiz and Karim are parked in the bazaar not far from home. Several other taxis are parked around them. Until last year, Hafiz and Karim and other *chillia*

drivers parked in a straight line just off the main road. This was the space where drivers performed handovers from one shift to another. Drivers referred to this area of parking and rest as a *naka*, while spaces of driving and movement were referred to as *roads*. *Nakas* describe places where a road ends, but they are also places where another road begins. Therefore, a *naka* is where movement either stops or where one enters a road. *Naka* also denotes a crossroads or a place where two roads stop to meet. For regulars at a particular *naka*, the *naka* is a place of rest and recovery from driving work. For those who do not belong, such as fleet and ride-share cabs, the *naka* makes for a place of conflict.



Figure 3. Parking at *naka*. Photo by Tarini Bedi.

Different drivers have unspoken rights to particular *nakas*. Therefore, *nakas* are malleable topographic and social spaces. *Nakas* are also interstitial ecological spaces characterized by a mixture of ecological and social possibility. Like ruderal spaces (Stoetzer 2018), *nakas* are neither wild nor planned; but unlike abandoned ruderal spaces, they are socially thick and heavily used. They are also where most driving work unfolds.

At this *naka*, the precision with which each driver slid his car into a vertical parking spot made it operate and look like an official taxi stand. Traffic police allowed parking as though it were a government-sanctioned stand. At the start

of my research, this *naka* led to a slum settlement. Now this settlement had been demolished and a tall building inched its way up through the uneven gravel into the hazy sky. Future residents of this new building would need a paved road for their cars to enter the *naka* and exit onto the road. An unpaved *naka* would not do. In preparation, the unpaved *naka* where taxis had once stood in precise parked lines was haphazardly dug up. The debris from this digging had made its way to the paved road. The mounds of debris that extended out of the *naka* and onto the roads made it difficult to tell where the construction began, where the *naka* ended, or where the road emerged in textural and topographic terms (De Boek and Baloji 2017).

For those who live and work in and on these surfaces, as Joseph Amato (2013, 1–16) argues, the “surface is where the action is.”²² For Hafiz and Karim, who drive older taxis, malleable topographies are palpable along the roads as potholes, ditches, and uneven surfaces. But they are most palpable when drivers remain in place at the *naka*. The *naka* is where material and environmental debris shifts with topographical regularity. This is why the *naka* constitutes a significant ecological place: it is where driving work takes place beyond demarcations between the completed, the emergent, and the still-to-be-built city.

For instance, at this *naka*, rubble from both road and building construction scattered like bundles of fuselage—a mixture of stone, bitumen, cement, concrete, old plastic bags, leaked petrol, and leftover rainwater. As a result, taxis encountered uneven, but incrementally familiar terrain. They no longer lined up as they once did, but parked as they move on the roads: out of line, but not out of place. Drivers maneuvered around mounds of fuselage until they found angles of rest in a place that is neither road nor the *naka* it once was. The space has materialized from the work of digging and from accidental shifts of debris between roads and *naka* discarded from various other construction and building.

Those who use Mumbai’s roads most encounter this debris as accidental terrain everywhere. Sometimes this terrain is a road, sometimes a *naka*, and sometimes a taxi stand. *Chillia* drivers navigate these topographical contradictions between the planned and unplanned city to make the accidental familiar. They know what the *naka* can become. They know that how it is used shifts incrementally, depending on the season, the value of surrounding land, or the moods of the municipality. Drivers talk about the Padmini taxi as the hardiest car in this moody, accidental terrain. Its wheels and undercarriage can brave accidental debris, and its body is toughened against accidental encounters with other bodies who share the road. They are strong against the battering monsoon; they are cars that move

slower than others, but also ones that share their drivers' *dhairya* to do what is possible with their bodies—and nothing more.

The traffic police who left taxis alone when this was an unpaved *naka* now showed up to this dug-up debris to threaten drivers with parking tickets. Sitting in the same place they had been in for twenty years, Hafiz, Karim, and their taxis became part of this tangle between streets, *nakas*, roads, and taxi stands. They were hardly passive victims of this shift, but participated through collective practices of *dhairya*—patience to see what would happen. To casual observers, the leftover *naka* debris signals a cityscape in disarray. Yet drivers say that the *naka's* unpaved debris offers a cooler place to rest precisely because it does not absorb and let off the radiant heat of paved roads. While rains settle into unpaved *nakas* like small urban lakes, this water is cooling, and used by drivers to wash off a dirty shoe or to entice goats at the butcher shop toward a place to drink before imminent slaughter.

As the *naka* claws itself into a road, *chillia* have expanded thick relations with others here. Access to the mounds and areas of parking around the debris are reserved for *chillia* drivers. During the Eid, Diwali, and wedding seasons, visitors to markets and nearby buildings attempt parking here. Younger *chillia* men stack piles of sharp rubble to build makeshift speed bumps to deter the entry of other cars. Visiting drivers curse in exasperation as they disentangle their cars and tires from the jagged stones. It is common to see young scrap-pickers going through the debris for pieces of glass, metal, discarded plastic bottles, and plastic bags that make their way into the debris from surrounding markets. Since *chillia* know this debris well, they direct pickers to spots particularly rich with what could be resold as scrap. Over time, this interstitial space between *naka* and road has materialized as social, supporting environmental relations between different people making a living amid digging and debris. It provides a vital node in a circular economy, between those who create environmental debris and those who repair and recycle it. For example, [Gastón Gordillo \(2014\)](#) argues that rubble is not simply a figure of negativity but the *afterlife* of ruins and destruction. At this *naka*, rubble signals myriad forms of construction rather than destruction. *Chillia* know that it is construction interrupted, construction finished somewhere else and dumped in this place, or construction about to begin. This is why waiting with *dhairya*, and enduring the rubble when everyone else has given up on it, promises new parking and resting spaces. Further, rubble at the *naka* often turns into something else. The *naka's* rubble is the infrastructural spring of the never-ending dust that billows and spreads into everything, what drivers call *dhooli*.

DUST, WATER, *DHOOLI*

As Habib and Karim read their papers, two young boys, Ali and Hamza, scuttle through the zigzag of cars at the *naka*, carrying soapy buckets of water, bright yellow washcloths, and scrubbing brushes. Ali slathers each car with the yellow, soapy slush. Hamza dips his cloth lightly into the water, squeezes soapy suds onto the road, and carefully wipes off grime accumulated from various parts of Mumbai on windows and windshields. Dust from fumes of sticky, black carbon has settled into a grimy charcoal that clings to taxis like it belongs there. Dust constitutes the pervasive ecological background to life and living. Dust is central to life's routines and regimens of cleaning, removing, building, and repairing (Amato 2000). Dust is spatially recalcitrant, moving around urban landscapes, unmindful of social and material boundaries of inside or outside. Those who move around Mumbai's landscape cannot escape it. For drivers, dust clings to skin, beard, hair, and clothes and penetrates bodies; it scrapes the throat and irritates the eyes. In Mumbai, dust mixes with rain and humidity to become grime and sludge.

In Indian cities, dust and grime are everywhere (Shulman 2009). In Mumbai, the longer you move around the city, the more you absorb these accumulations (Agard-Jones 2013; Roberts 2017). Hafiz's taxi is speckled with the gray-and-white crust of pigeon excretions acquired from parking too long under laburnum trees. Karim's car has the jet-black grime that emanates from diesel engines and settles onto the car seats, hands, and clothes of drivers. Karim agrees that he feels the grime in his throat and lungs, but as he watches Hamza sluice the dirt off the body of the car, he marvels at how much the car absorbs what would otherwise blow into his throat. Both cars also flaunt the lighter, yellow dust from the crumbling gravel of road-building that flies around cars and breezes through their windows. And then there is the ashen, grainy cement dust from the ever-proliferating construction sites across Mumbai.

Professional motoring unfolds amid these transient ecologies of accumulation. Drivers call this *dhooli*—an endless form of environmental, chemical, and organic accumulation that young men are paid to wipe, scrub, and clean off cars across Mumbai every day. Mumbai's dusty ecologies provide several labor opportunities to young men. Ali and Hamza periodically scamper over to a tap of water by the construction site to empty dirty water and refill buckets. As they await the filling buckets, they run their hands through the cool water, touch the coolness to their faces, and sprinkle water playfully at each other. Neither is old enough to drive. Though like others their age, as car-washers, they encounter Mumbai's roads through *dhooli* long before they sit behind a wheel. The *dhooli* has no form to begin

with, but as Ali and Hamza encounter the dusted object of the car, they attend to its edges and dimensions, and lend an ear and eye to where it has been. This early knowledge of cars, emergent through dust, provides young men the choice to become mechanics rather than drivers when the time comes. The boys know when a taxi has waited in the salty sea breeze at the gateway of India, or idled in a traffic jam around spilled chutneys of snack shops in Thakurdwar, or when it has trudged through the muddy roads of the Aarey milk colony. This morning, they smell the musty luggage of Karim's early morning passengers and promise they will sweep crumbs of sleepily eaten food off the backseat. All these accumulations and knowledge end up in buckets at the *naka's* construction site.

Apart from a nod acknowledging their youthful energy, the construction workers and building engineers ignore the boys. They focus on their drilling and scraping, which periodically engulfs the *naka* in a thick *dhooli* of its own. On the higher floors, metal dust catapults into the heavens, while on the lower ones, it drops like a luminous waterfall onto the brick and cement trucks below. Sometimes it settles like metallic ash onto the building engineers' jeeps. These men occasionally ask the boys to dust off their cars. They assume the boys are brothers or else understand from observations of their choreographed work that they are enmeshed—therefore, they pay for cleaning in a lump sum to one of the boys each time. As the boys empty their buckets, scraps of dissolved pigeon shit and powdery city dust scrubbed off taxis trickle into the dry, earthy foundations of the building site; they spread like extended fingers into the ground and slowly disappear. Even before it is has become a structure in its own right, this emerging building has already absorbed gallons of Mumbai's *dhooli* from Ali's and Hamza's buckets.

The cleaning routine is remarkably choreographed between the boys as they wash Mumbai's environmental accumulations off the taxis and then send the *dhooli* into the depths of the city's earth. The boys enjoy dipping their hands first into the clear water and then into the more solid, dusty sludge that it becomes. The transformation from liquid to solid, the transfer of *dhooli* from car to bucket, marks a job well done. They are on schedule and plan to keep cleaning, as they usually do, until noon. Today, however, laborers on the construction site alert them that for the next month, the water supply might be turned off in the late morning to accommodate the plumbing needs of the building. Hearing this news, the boys move faster. The temporalities of car washing and removal of Mumbai's *dhooli* are tied to these arbitrary shifts in water supply. The water supply is directed and stopped from places and by people these boys will never see (Björkman 2015). Yet they take gently and in stride the fact that they have so little control over the main

resource of their work. Car-washers are always adjusting their work tempos with *dhairya*, and without complaint about these shifts.

As the boys approach Hafiz's and Karim's cars, the men fold their newspapers, slide off their taxis, gather up their prayer mats, and move toward a sheltered area on the construction site. In anticipation of the water stoppage, construction laborers stand around the tap filling bottles for drinking water to keep them going through the imminent afternoon heat. These workers are far from home and cut off from the settled living that *chillia* enjoy. They are migrant workers, who sleep in the open under tarps close to the construction sites, with little access to regular water supplies or protection from trees or cars. If the drivers and car-washers use this water for cleaning themselves and their cars, the construction workers imbibe it as drinking water to keep their bodies running. In this way, water, how it is used, and the labor practices it enables signal the multiple vulnerabilities and possibilities of urban work. The water itself has a shared tactile place here. While Ali and Hamza use water for washing and play, the construction workers find relief in its coolness as they drink and splash their hands and faces with it, taking pleasure in the cold relief on bodies that have lifted and drilled for hours in the beating sun.

The presence of water also makes it possible for *chillia* to sustain life as pious Muslims. Karim reminds me that the Koran states that all living beings are created by god out of water. Therefore, availability of water to wash before prayers directs where *chillia* drivers stop several times a day. Karim has mapped in his head all the *nakas* and taxi stands where he can find clean water and a place without stray dogs for his prayers. Hafiz and Karim lean over the same tap where Ali and Hamza fill their buckets and where construction workers scramble for drinking water and relief from the heat. Both men wash with the cool water—cleaning their bodies for the devotion that follows. The same water supply that washes their cars also cleanses and cools their bodies for their *namaaz* (prayers). The loudspeaker at the mosque crackles. The *maulvi* (Islamic scholar) clears his throat before he begins his undulating chant calling the neighborhood to prayer. While roads are rife with honking, the *naka* is characterized by these chants. *Chillia* drivers move in and out of roads and *nakas* as much as they do between sounds of horns and prayer as the ecologies of sound distinguish places of rest and reverence from those of movement and mobility.

Almost in unison Hafiz and Karim hurl their prayer mats open under the shade of the last two rain trees on the construction site. They sit side by side and close their eyes. As is customary in Muslim prayer, they bend their heads to the ground several times as they quietly, and audible only to each other, mur-

mur verses from the Koran. *Dhooli* from their unpaved surroundings blows onto their mats and onto their faces as their beards gently brush against the ground their foreheads share with their parked cars. The *naka* has been transformed into a surface of worship, and the wheels of the taxis and the praying foreheads of the taximen are imprinted with the same *dhooli*. I observed them perform this intimate moment of shared silence in the same spot over many years. This is a silence shared between them. The rest of us cover our ears as we jump out of the way of a honking cement truck backing into the construction site while the manager yells expletives at the truck driver. Meditative and shared silence, practiced through daily *namaaz* amid the noisy onslaught of the city, provides a way for Karim and Hafiz to live through the sensory and environmental *gadbad* of Mumbai. Their work, their claims to kinship, their piety, their capacity to enjoy a shared silence, and their refusal of hopelessness and damage coalesce in this jetsam space of noise, dust, *dhooli*, receding water supply, and prayer at the *naka*.

Karim and Hafiz are joined in prayer by Habib, another veteran *chillia* driver. Habib carefully bends over to sift through the ground. He removes some pebbles and nails and lays down his prayer mat, before he notices me watching him. He gives me his characteristically wise smile. Before I can ask, he preempts my question about why he chooses to pray here instead of at home, which is just two minutes away. “I like to pray here, in the open with my brothers. Yes, you may think that we live and pray in *kachra* (dirt); by that I don’t mean we are dirty, but we live in stones and dirt. We have to make Bambaai out of this only, not out of something else. Don’t come and tell me to learn to eat with a knife and fork to make me become modern. I just need a plate. Let me do my business, drive my car, and live my life, and I will find my own plate. I don’t need a knife and fork.”

CONCLUSION: Sensate Ecologies

Habib’s “We have to make Bambaai out of this [stones and dirt]” offers a powerful illustration that Hafiz, Karim, and Habib have developed an astute understanding of how and where they live and of what kinds of lives and futures they can make there—and of how these sensate ecologies become what Ahmed calls home. *Kachra*, as dirt and rubbish, aggregates all the “bad” ecologies of dirt, dust, debris, and smog. Yet as *chillia* encounter the sensate ecologies that emerge and grow around them as *kachra* at places of rest, or as *gadbad* on the roads, they exercise *dhairya*, endurance and patience. This enables them to flourish both physically and ethically in these environments. Here, I have argued for an understanding of sensate urban ecology *with* those who work and live in it—through the bumpy

roads and dusty air—rather than through a path paved by environmental science or ecological science. Using the work of hereditary driving as a lens, I have shown that sensate living as a driver in a city’s urban ecologies—*gadbad*—and the various ways of orienting to this living, develop as labor expertise that forges collective and sustainable labor relations even amid ecological onslaught (cf. Liboiron 2021). Moreover, sensate ecologies of driving are not just ecological or cognitive orientations but also social and public categories that are collectively understood and practiced by hereditary Mumbai taxi drivers.

Gadbad as the multisensory coalescence of urban experience and *dhairya* as an ethical position within these sensate ecologies prove key categories here. Through attention to urban ecologies that manifest in multisensory terms as they shape and are shaped by driving work, I have decoupled ecological destruction and unsustainability wrought by cars from a discussion of what life sustained around automobiles looks like. The synergies between the labor of the senses and the ecologies of the city are what I call sensate ecologies. Drivers encounter these in the form of dust, debris, *nakas*, roads, and surfaces. These are not fixed matter but a materialization of social, political, and ecological possibilities that sustain good labor relations and urban work. These make and sometimes harm cities, but they also make and sustain working lives. These sensate ecologies constitute sites (or interfaces) for the emergence of urban knowledge, the expression of kinship and sociality, and an ethical attunement that refuses damage. The *chillia* taxi business as understood through sensate ecologies unfolds not just at the road level but also at the street level, *naka* level, and mud, sludge, smog-and dust levels of the city—in the city’s *gadbad*. In this sense, *gadbad* elides an urban theory based on the demarcations between the planned and unplanned city. I show that this sensate knowledge and embodied expertise is neither survivalism nor “resistance” to ecological destruction. Instead, urban and labor anthropology can be expanded by understanding how people live sensorially, working *with* and *in* difficult urban worlds, rather than against them.

ABSTRACT

I decouple the commonly discussed ecological destruction and unsustainability wrought by cars from a discussion of what life lived and sustained around automobiles looks like. Through fieldwork with hereditary Muslim taxi drivers in Mumbai, I look at urban ecological relations with those who work in what I call sensate ecologies. A sensate-ecologies approach connects labor and urban ecology and argues for a collective rather than an individual subject of urban theory. What I describe

here as drivers' sensate ecological relations with a difficult city—a condition that is usually considered ecologically and infrastructurally unsustainable—calls into question assumptions about ecological damage and precarious urban life. By analyzing taxi driving as relational, sensate work, rather than as precarious labor, I argue that urban sensate ecologies produce expertise for hereditary drivers that sustain over generations. I conclude that even unsustainable ecological onslaughts of automobility produce coexistence and sustainable social and sensate relations. [senses; cities; labor; ecologies; sustainability; automobilities; ethical orientations]

NOTES

Acknowledgments With thanks to all those who funded the long-term fieldwork for this project: the American Institute of Indian Studies, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the National Science Foundation's Cultural Anthropology Program (BCS #1917969). I am deeply grateful for those who read and commented on various early versions of this piece, particularly Michele Friedner, Lisa Bjorkman, Ather Zia, and the generous reviewers for *Cultural Anthropology*. I would also like to thank all the participants in the departmental colloquium at the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology for engaging so productively as I made the final revisions, particularly Romm Lewkowicz, who was the paper discussant, and Amy Leia MacLachlan, who provided generous and extensive written comments.

1. Bombay was renamed Mumbai in 1995. I use *Bombay* when referring to the pre-1995 period and *Mumbai* when referring to the post-1995 period.
2. I deliberately use the term *onslaught*, rather than more commonly used terms such as *climate change*, *catastrophe*, or *apocalypse* because it better reflects the sensate and the local references to chronic harm and chaos. A detailed development of the concept of *onslaught* lies beyond the scope of this article.
3. I take up broader discussions of skill and expertise in other work (see [Bedi 2022](#)).
4. See [Audra Simpson \(2014\)](#) on refusal.
5. See [Michelle Murphy \(2017\)](#) on Tuck.
6. Suspending damage does not signal a denial of the vital need to highlight and critique the brutality of the majoritarian Indian state against Indian Muslims. It is instead an invitation to understand Muslim lives and aspirations as they wish to be understood.
7. With gratitude to Amy Leia MacLachlan for pushing me to deepen my articulation of this decolonial and feminist environmental critique.
8. I am inspired by [Max Liboiron's \(2021\)](#) provocation of how analytical understandings of good relations travel cross-culturally.
9. See [Harris Solomon \(2021\)](#) for living “in” infrastructures.
10. See [Paul Stoller \(1997\)](#) on sensuous scholarship.
11. For debates between phenomenological and sensory approaches see [David Howes \(2011, 2022\)](#).
12. See [Sara Ahmed \(2006\)](#) on orientation and queer phenomenology. With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.
13. With thanks to Amy Leia MacLachlan for provoking me to think about the chronicity of the unavoidable and the inevitable; and to Robert Desjarlais for the wise recognition that Rashid's story is also the story of all of us.
14. See [Veena Singh \(2017\)](#) on *gadbad* ice-cream. A mixture of flavors that began as an error of proportions (*gadbad*) and ended up most famously on the menu of a well-known ice-cream parlor.
15. See [Jennifer C. Hsieh \(2021\)](#) on sensory response.
16. *Chillia* come from the western Indian state of Gujarat and speak Gujarati.

17. With gratitude to Ather Zia for highlighting other emic and decolonial approaches to life in difficult places.
18. With thanks to an anonymous reviewer.
19. Loosely calling on cultural narratives of Hindu communities, Indian Muslim caste has a distinct history and politics.
20. See [Timothy Morton \(2010\)](#) on ecological thought as coexistence.
21. I draw this social approach to sustainability from [Max Liboiron \(2021\)](#) and feminist STS to counter and refuse the hegemonic environmental sustainability paradigm.
22. Also see [Jonathan Anjaria \(2020\)](#) on surfaces.

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