

THRESHOLDS AND GATES
the space of encounter

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THRESHOLDS AND GATES:
the space of encounter

How the coexistence of the
human and non-human realm
shapes the architecture and
urban layout in Ahmedabad,
Gujarat, India

> *Bulls bathing in the River
Ganga
Varanasi
2018
Personal Archive*

<< *The Jantar Mantar
(astronomical observatory) in
Jaipur, Rajasthan
Jaipur
2018
Personal Archive
Leicaflex SL*



I moved to India in May, 2018 to work in Balkrishna Doshi's architecture office in Ahmedabad. Ahmedabad is a city of five million inhabitants located on the banks of the Sabarmati river in the desertic region of Gujarat. I lived there for four months, until the end of summer. Living in India means that, most of all, you will have to share your living space with *other* animals. Cities are inhabited by monkeys, cows, peacocks, elephants and all sorts of creatures. During the time that I've spent there, I always found extreme fascination in how smooth and interdependent the life cycles of all the living beings are. Being born in Milan and having spent most of my life there, I was at first scared of the continuous proximity to *non-humans*¹. Eventually, I became used to it, understanding and appreciating the benefits that this cohabitation was giving me. I had often felt that these animals were misplaced in the urban context of the city, that they should have been somewhere else, in the wilderness, far away from humans' inhabited centres. While reading *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places; New Geographies of human-animal Relations* (Philo and Wilbert, 2000) I became aware of the term "imaginative geography"² (E.Said, 1978) used by E. Said to express the action of imagining the "right" place

for animals in relation to the space of the human kind. In this way we define living beings as pets, wild animals, food, clothes and shoes; by defining their "use" we select the space that they deserve. Such a method of organizing the living being society is widely diffused in the Western regions of the globe, whereas such a clear distinction among territories is less to be found in rural and less advanced settlements³. For example, in India: if on one hand it is possible to claim that the presence of non-humans in urbanized centres is due to the underdevelopment of the country, on the other hand it is impossible to underestimate the power of Indian's "ritual respect for life"⁴ (J.L. Kipling, 1904). The majority of the Indian population is *Hindu* and even though it became always less common to strictly respect the guidelines⁵ of the religion, most of the rituals are still deeply-rooted in the peoples' traditions and values. In the same way, it is possible to recognize the attention paid to the living beings in the urban layout of the city. Temples devoted to animal-like divinities, spaces for feeding birds and animals, city farms and hospitals shape the chaotic net of streets, creating spaces of active interaction among the two realms.

This research addresses what is currently the space dedicated to the practices and activities that occur between human and non-human. It also questions if it is possible to find a shared view on the same theme in regions with a radically different social structure. I find it fundamental to give importance and to report my first impressions on the "displacement" of animals in the Indian cities, integrating a "western" sight in the argument. I will therefore relate to the emergence of zoos and menageries in Europe. Counterposed to it, I will analyse the Indian rituals and daily celebrations that bring the two realms together.

¹ *The human society has always placed animals in mental and physical space other than its own, forgetting that the humans are animals as well. In this research, I will refer to non-humans as animals, and to the "other" animals as humans.*

² *see original quotation from Said's Orientalism 1978, pg. 54-55, 71-72*

³ *"Although those peoples who live a life of 'being-with' (as opposed to 'against') animals may genuinely have much to teach urban Western societies, it must also be acknowledged that those very peoples are themselves incredibly marginalised economically, politically, socially and culturally in global spaces (Shiva and Mies, 1993; Tapper 1994; 56)."*

⁴ *As stated by John Lockwood Kipling in *Beast and Man in India, A popular sketch of Indian animals in their relation with people. At the same time, Kipling criticises the application of the respect for life, saying that "ritual respect for life[...] is not true humanity, nor it is practised with sufficient intelligence or feeling to profit the animals". Kipling refers especially to ill animals which are suffering but cannot be killed in respect to the Hindu beliefs. Though, one wonders why K. is referring to 'humanity'.**

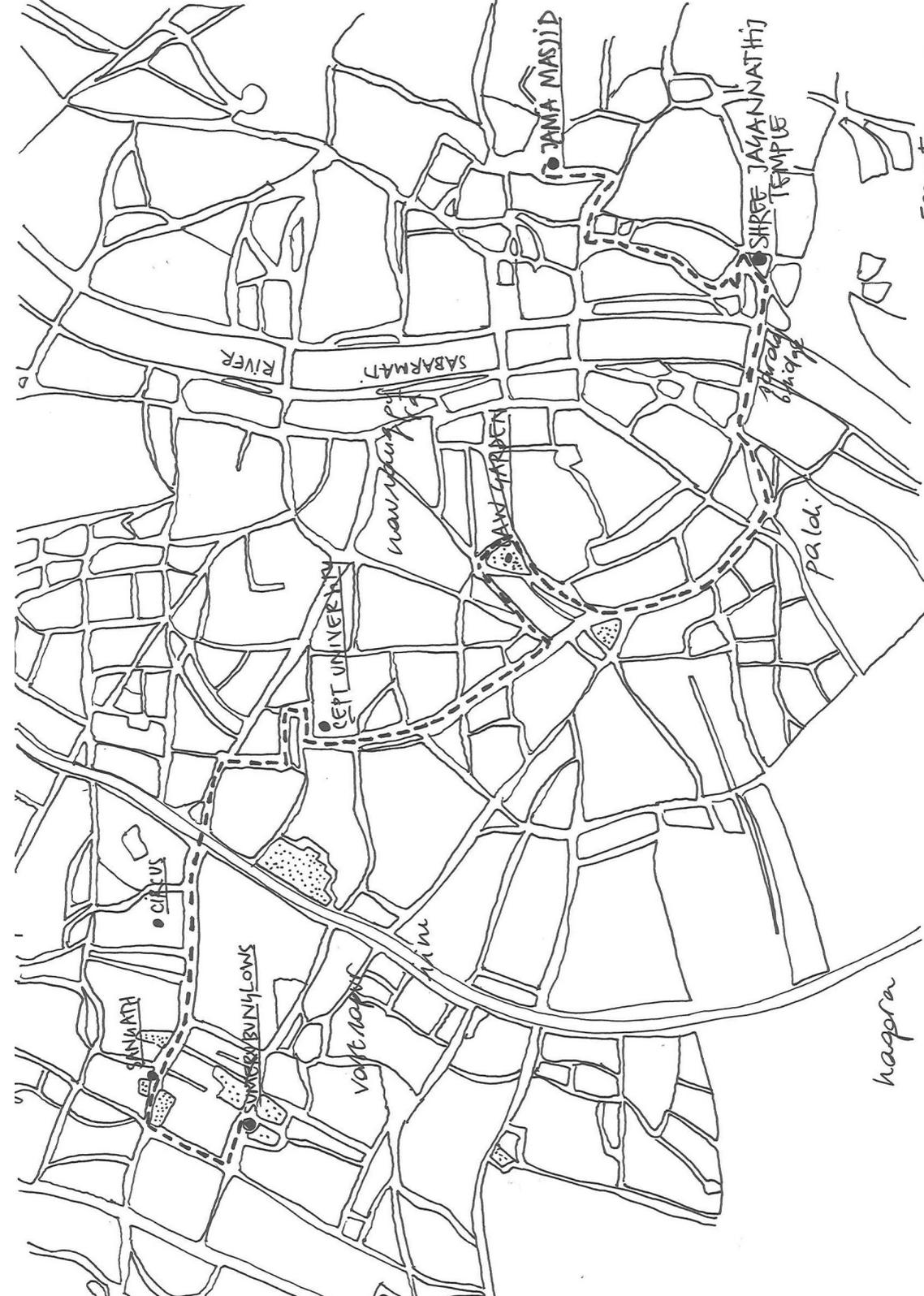
⁵ *It is not entirely correct to speak of dogmas in the Hindu forms of religiosity, the Hindu religion is followed more as a lifestyle.*

To reach the Old City from my home takes more or less thirty minutes. The variable influencing the length of the ride is the condition of the traffic, which often results in being terrible, especially during peak hours and when the dark monsoon clouds cover the sky and release all the water that they've been holding for the past year. The easiest way to reach it if you don't have a scooter is to take a *rickshaw*⁶. These are Piaggio vehicles designed to carry an apparently infinite number of passengers, depending on how many manage to squeeze in it. They offer a basic service but are equipped with every sort of stereo set and Gods' icons to protect the driver from bad luck and accidents that can occur along the way. To most rickshaw drivers, whom you can address saying "kaka" (meaning uncle, in Hindi) or "bahia" (for friend or brother), their *tuktuk* is also a home. It is all they have, and you can see them at late night, parking the car on a dark corner of the street and trying to catch sleep in there. Often after lunch time they take a break from the long work shifts and nap in the backseats, reading the newspaper, smoking *beedi* and chewing *pan*. I've seen rickshaws carry all sort of things. During the Sunday flea market on the East side of the Sabarmati river, the drivers

patiently wait for costumers at the market gate and help them carry the goods that they've purchased: bicycles, home appliances and tools, furniture, food and even goats and chickens. To keep the animals still during the ride (rickshaws don't have doors) and avoid them to get hurt or to escape, hay is given to them. It is wonderful to see the new owner of a goat keeping the animal close and pamper it, while the goat happily eats in the wild Indian traffic. Sometimes, when riding, you can still find some hay and corn in the backseats.

⁶ Please consult the Hindi pocket dictionary in the last pages for a translation and explanation of the terms used in the redaction of this essay.

> Tuktuk travel route in Ahmedabad: from Sumeru Bungalows to Jama Masjid



For most of the time I've spent in Ahmedabad I've been living in a *bungalow* in Sumeru Society, on the west fast-developing side of the city. Societies are neighbourhood units in the Indian urban layout. They are enclosed by a fence and a watchman monitors who enters and exits: they are considered safe places. The neighbourhood is organized in small streets that guarantee access to every unit, usually a two or three floors detached house, with a small garden in the backyard and a terrace. Owners' cars and scooters are parked on the sides of the streets and tall *neem* trees grow in the gardens, muffling and softening the car noise of the big street just outside the gate. *Neem* trees are sacred for Hindus; not only they protect from the harsh sun, but they offer shelter to many animals, especially monkeys. I lived in a three storeys yellow-plastered small house. It was the second house on the left once entered from the main gate, the entrance fence painted in a bright aquamarine blue. A pebble path led to the main entrance of the house. The threshold was marked by two concrete blocks of about the height of a bench, on the right and left side of the entrance door, under a porch. This configuration - called *otla* - is typical of Indian houses, where

somebody - a maid, a craftsman, an electrician or a plumber or just your neighbour - is always wanting to meet you. In this way, workers and friends can wait for the house owners without getting a sunstroke. *Otlas* are typical vernacular elements to be found especially in Gujarati houses, both in the *pols* of the old city and in the societies in the new areas of the west. They are spaces of encounter, where neighbours meet, but the elevation that characterizes them marks a hierarchical distinction between the street level and the level of the house. Strangers, vehicles and big animals remain on the lower level of the road, while the people of the house are assured a safe spot few steps above. Therefore, the blue gate that marks the passage from the street to the private house was not effective in its aim that is to enclose and to protect. The private space of the house only starts at the *otla*, in front of the house door. We often met there to sip *chai* in the warm nights. In the city there are many stray dogs, and in Sumeru there were as well. They are everywhere and protect their neighbourhood as responsibly as they were protecting their owner's house. If you're new to a place, they are the first ones to know. They will recognize you as a stranger, as somebody that doesn't

belong there. They usually move in groups, and you can be certain that you'll find them always in the same places, they are called "sher na kurta" (E. David, 2016) in Gujarati. Sumeru's dogs were few and the watchman took good care and fed them. Nonetheless, they liked to sneak in the backyard from the blue fence (without any big effort) and eat the leftovers from our dustbin.



^ Typical *otla* configuration at the threshold of a house in the old city
Ahmedabad
December 2017
Personal archive



The days got extremely warm in the months of May and June, and even if it wasn't of much help, we were trying to ventilate the house keeping the windows and the doors open. All the windows were equipped with window bars: I couldn't really understand the use of it, at the beginning. One Sunday I woke up late, with the tremendously big Indian sun shining in my bedroom. The sun in India is so big you can barely distinguish where it ends and begins – when it rises and sets. It shines on everything indiscriminately, without shadows. The light is filtered by the thick layer of pollution and sand that covers the city like a blanket. It was extremely warm in my room: I got up to open the small windows, hoping some breeze would come in. The window glasses were opaque, to filter the bright outside light. A tall tree had been planted on the right of my window, to prevent strangers' eyes to peek inside the private bedrooms. I suddenly noticed a long, soft grey tale hanging from the biggest branch. I followed it with my sight and suddenly saw an entire family of monkeys sleeping between the leaves. I left the window open, mesmerized by my proximity to what I used to call wild⁷ nature. After that day, the monkeys came to visit many times. My friend Sandeep explained

me that they migrate, just like birds do, and find shelter in those parts of the city where the vegetation is still luxuriant and dense. Not many parks contribute to the urban network and the shaded green areas are usually imbedded in neighbourhoods and societies, or in university campuses: this is where they are to be found. As the city expands and burns acres of forest and rural land, monkeys are forced to seek for shelter and food in the urban areas. They can get extremely violent if they get interrupted in their activities or bothered by humans. They are attracted to any kind of objects and like to play with them; I remember seeing their joy in taking tools from construction sites under the preoccupied looks of the workers.

To get to the old city, I would catch a rickshaw at the nearest junction, standing on one side of the road and holding my arm up, swinging my hand, until a *kaka* or a *bahia* would stop to let me jump on. That morning as well, after putting on my sandals, filling my water bottle from the terracotta pot in the kitchen and grabbing a shawl to enter Jama Masjid⁸, I closed the blue gate behind my back and headed to the sandy street. Once I found a tuktuk that agreed on taking me to the other

side of the city we headed north, in direction Drive In Road, one of the biggest ways that connect the east and the west of the city. The stretch that separates us from the junction is a paved road squeezed between a school and a sand field where children play cricket and kabaddi. On the left side after the school entrance, my eyes spot the gate of another residential society. I don't know its name, but the fence that comes into sight behind the trees and the watchman are familiar to me. We greet every day, when I go and come back from work. Along the main boulevard of the neighbourhood some semi-circular metal structures were installed, maybe in the hope that some vegetation would grow and climb upon them, gifting the space some shade. Every day at sunset, when I walk back from the office, I see a peacock on the highest of the metal arches. It is owned by no one and everybody at the same time. It belongs to the neighbourhood and therefore, to the community. Everybody is taking care of it but nobody owns it⁹. Peacocks, as dogs and more small animals, are for the streets (E. David, 2016). I often stopped to watch the big bird climb up the arch and tried to convince the watchman to let me in to get a closer look.

⁷Since then, my only encounter with what the Western society describes as "wild" found place in dedicated spaces where I was kept safe from the animals themselves on the other side of a cage, or a fence. "Wild animals in cages or in chains showed nature's wildness, albeit safely contained" (Donna C. Mehos, 2006).

⁸Jama Masjid, or Jumah is a mosque in the Old City of Ahmedabad. Women are allowed to enter during certain hours, respecting the prayer times and covering their head.

⁹In "Ahmedabad, a city with a past", E. David describes feeding stray animals as "part of our country's great recycling system". It is a common practice, in India, to feed stray animals with food leftovers, or by leaving the trash in the streets. This is seen as an act of devotion and great love, even though it ignores the animals' ingestion of toxic materials like plastic or metal. Therefore, I consider it not only as "part of the country's recycling system" but also as part of the country's great contradictions.

*<< Sleeping outside Village nearby Jaipur 2017
Personal archive*

*<< One of the university's dogs sleeping on the desk of a design studio class CEPT University Ahmedabad 2017
Personal archive*



Every time, kaka smiles and tells me that unfortunately this time it won't be possible; or, at least, this is how I translate his gestures. We don't speak the same language, but when he smiles he repeats *nahi, nahi* and shakes his head, patiently. While the rickshaw drives past the gate and the watchman's empty chair, I lean out of the vehicle, trying to spot the bird. The sun just started to set, the air is still warm and bright: the peacock is probably still in one of the courtyards.

Following the road, we find ourselves at the junction with Drive In Rd. To avoid the traffic divider the *rickshaw-wallah* protrudes his left leg out of the vehicle, and abruptly turns left

travel-diary

^ A monkey family on the
Neem tree outside my house
in Ahmedabad
2018
Personal Archive

against the traffic flow, holding the steering wheel with one hand while with the other he digits a number on his cell phone. After a few meters, he turns right, overcoming the traffic divider and finally advancing in the direction of travel. On the left side, a tall wall encloses the architecture studio in which I work. It's called *Sangath*, that means moving together. I think this place saved my life many times when I felt lost in the irremediable entropy of the metropolitan jungle. From the outside it's hard to guess what the grey concrete barrier surrounds: observing what is beyond the partition one can only see branches of trees. The foliage is dense and still. Spaces like this, where the vegetation is condensed in a single spot are not commonly found. Much of it lays in the cracks of the urban tissue or in forgotten corners: what we find here it is in fact "an ecology of fragmentation" (M. Schilthuisen, 2018). If inside the wall there's apparent calmness, many things are happening outside. A barber improvised his activity hanging a mirror to the wall and placing a chair in front of it. Clients queue up to get a haircut while they sip the hot *chai* that the next stall is selling. In the point where the wall turns to follow the road a small shrine finds place.

It's dedicated to the divinity Naga, that appears as the Indian cobra in hindu iconography. The shrine is richly decorated, with colourful stones and mirrors. Inside it, a statue of the cobra is surrounded by flowers, incense and other *puja gifts* for the God. Icons of gods and goddesses are imbedded in the concrete on the whole length of the wall. It seems like every space is a good place to praise the Gods. Paintings and small statues representing the divinities are held in shops and stores, in houses – in which it is sometimes possible to find a room reserved to prayers and offerings - and even on rickshaws' dashboards. Often, small shrines develop into actual temples. There is one, not far from the Naga shrine, close to the first house in which I was living. In the centre of an improvised roundabout, stands a sort of "spiritual island". On a podium, big enough to allow the get together of a bunch of people, an altar is positioned. In precise hours of the evening celebrations are held there. Hindus from the whole city reach the spot on their scooters, carrying gifts to the divinities (especially coconuts, Sandeep once told me they are the gods' favourites). A portion of the goods which is donated and got blessed by the deity is returned to the people, according to the loop

that characterizes hindu spirituality: giving and receiving, and then giving back¹⁰. One can recognize the small temple from afar; in the evenings colourful lights are projected on it to indicate the landmark and a loud rhythmic Indian music spreads from the stereo set. In front of the altar, surrounded by a fence, men and women find space to sit and pray. The scooters are parked just outside this worship area, partially obstructing the traffic. When the rickshaw-wallah drives past to this, not so many people have joined the celebration yet. Some women are holding their children in their arms, praying undisturbed by the surrounding chaos. The refined ladies' saris wave in the wind while they cover their head and mouth with a shawl, protecting their lungs from the dust.

The landscape changes fast as we proceed along a straight line heading to the Sabarmati river. Concrete towers perforated by small windows and with a/c systems installed on the façade leave now space to big sand lots. Food fairs and exhibitions take place here, usually. Since some weeks, I've noticed craftsmen and workers setting up a circus tent. On the wall that surrounds the plot colourful posters advertise the event: the upcoming show offers

horse riding and an elephant cricket match (usually played in teams, India versus Pakistan), followed by a dog and parrot show. From the plastic backseat of the Ape car I stare at them surprised. If it's true that the Indian society has a unique way to treat and respect animals, it is also true that these ways are most of the time contradictory and inconsistent.

I've always been used to see "wild" animals through the bars of a cage, or by spotting them through a fence. When I visited my grandparents in Germany as a kid we used to go to the zoo quite often. *Beasts* live confined in restricted areas in the Western Society, which is caught busy in the intent of exercising its power and superiority not only on lands and peoples, but also on *nature*¹¹. The birth of such places dates back to colonialism, when the interest in collecting, owning and displaying natural and ethnographic specimens from the conquered lands grew so much that it became an element intensifying the pride for national identity and cultural knowledge. The brutal violence that occurred in this process of enriching the nations' *knowledge* and *pride* with physical proof was considered legitimate. The living collections needed to be stored in newly designed spaces



that are well known today: zoos. If zoos and zoological societies had been established and promoted in the name of zoological *science*, as soon as the space became more accessible to the middle class, animal presence started to play a role in public entertainment¹². A thread connects the East and the West: the display and interaction of animals for the public's amusement. In Europe fights between human and non-humans were theatrically organized, aggressively giving shape to the concept of "fighting against nature"¹³, portraying a society that is desperately trying to legitimate its power; whether in Indian cities the attempts to fight and to make the wild harmless are considered pointless. Since "wilderness" finds itself already domesticated in the moment in which it clashes with the rituals of the urban centres, adapting to it and consequently evolving, it is possible to distinguish a different intention in the display of animals which consists in the *celebration* of the latter – even if arguable.

The rickshaw-wallah breaks softly and stops. We're stuck in a traffic jam; I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't realize that cars, scooters and vehicles started to come up beside us, making the air unbreathable. I

put my shawl on my mouth, inhaling slowly. Kaka looks at me in the rear-view mirror and smiles, shaking his shoulders. He assures me that we will reach the destination, sooner or later. I suggest him to take a detour and turn right at the next intersection, in direction CEPT university. He turns around and looks at me sceptical. His eyes indulge for a moment on the traffic. He nods and turns the steering wheel to the right, sticking out his leg to advise the drivers of his next move. Slowly he manages to unravel from the tedious traffic knot. Other vehicles follow us while the rickshaw turns right in a small, deserted street. A big brick building arises from the dense vegetation. It's the Architecture Faculty of the Ahmedabad University. I used to study there in December 2017 and I still come here often. It's a pleasant place: it is surrounded by trees and low artificial hills. Most of the activities are carried out in spaces which are neither inside or outside the main building. The walls are perforated by very big openings from ground to ceiling that are kept open in the morning and closed with wooden shutters during the hottest hours. The intermittent fluxes of wind suggest an in-between space, surrounded by bricks but open to receive the gifts of nature. On the

open ground floor, a pack of dogs sleeps under the desks and chairs. These were stray dogs adopted by the student association, that is now responsible for their health and well-being. Inside the borders of the university, they are free to move. They like to sleep on students' desks, play with drawings and chew on polystyrene models; despite this, they are loved by the student community because their presence helps to relieve stress and tension.

<<Elephant cricket match in a circus in Ahmedabad
Google photos

¹⁰ *This ritual attitude towards life and the appreciation of it finds its roots in the belief of the transmigration of souls: hindu devotees celebrate every living soul as preciously as their own's.*

¹¹ *This search for biological resources that could be transformed into commodities became known as bioprospecting", Decentering European Medicine, The Colonial Context of the Early History of Botany and Medicinal Plants, Jason T.W. Irving*

¹² *As P. Tait writes in Fighting Nature, Travelling anageries, animal acts and war shows.*

¹³ *Fighting Nature, Travelling manageries, animal acts and war shows, P Tait, Sydney University Press, 2006. Once again it was necessary to prove supremacy not only on territories, but also on the other animal realm.*

>> *One of the inner courtyards of IIM University Ahmedabad 2017
Personal Archive*





Following University Road we reach Law Garden, one of the most well know ahmedabadi parks. The sun is getting lower and the first stalls start to set up the goods at the limits of the street. On the south corner of the garden a group of performers offer a show to the passer-by, trying to earn some rupees. A child is walking on a suspended rope, singing and clapping her hands while an older man -probably her father- invites the spectators to go for a ride on the camel, or on the horse-drawn carriage. Some children stop by, excited at the sight of the horses and scream, asking their parents to pamper the animals. The more we move away from Law Garden, the

travel-diary

^ Cows in a small street in the centre of Varanasi
Varanasi
2018
Personal Archive
Leicaflex SL

<< The inner courtyard of CEPT University
Ahmedabad
2018
Personal Archive

less stalls are parked at the street's borders. We are getting closer to the riverfront and the low-income concrete towers make space to smaller detached houses. The traffic proceeds slowly but at a constant speed. Students in their uniform are going home from school, sipping *lassi* and *aamras* in the backseats of the scooters. As two cows cross the street, the rickshaw slows down. Kaka leans out towards one of the cows that is walking next to his vehicle. He touches it as he would caress his child and then touches on his front head mumbling some words in hindu that I don't understand. He looks at the pictures of the idols on the dashboard and moves his hand in a circle repeating a formula. In the street, a sphere of respect and protection arises from the sacred animals. Some touch them, some stare at them in silence; bicycles and scooter find a way round them to free the passage. Cows, like all the other animals that inhabit the metropolis, are free to move. Each of them has an owner: they live in farms spread around the city. It is quite common to own a cow for a family: beside the fact that they are deeply respected, they provide milk, too. Cows are not worshipped and are not recognized as the incarnation of a God. Nonetheless, they are connected

to the origin of life and to maternity and as the life of every other being, theirs is celebrated as well. The milk they produce has a very high spiritual value and the cheese and *ghee* obtained from it is offered as a gift in worship to other gods. The farms in which they live are called – translated from gujarati – *cow schools*. They provide shelter to the mammals during the night. A care keeper feeds them, gives them a bath in the morning and then opens the gate to let them wonder freely around the city until sunset, when all the cows return to their homes. There's no need to go and look for them, they recognize the path and remember the way back. They probably have a better knowledge of the streets than the most skilled rickshaw-whallas and know where to find food and people that would feed them.

Kaka puts the gear in ready to cross Sardar Bridge, one of the five connections between the two sides of the city. The Sabarmati is filled with water, peculiar condition for summer. In 2012, the requalification of the river banks has been inaugurated: it consists of a complete renewal of the sides of the river and the replacement of the natural earthy shore with a concrete promenade, accessible only to humans. The shore, which is

for living beings a vital space, where they find water and food, where men and women wash their clothes and their bodies and where the cotton from the industries is cleaned and then sold is now made inaccessible. Before the construction work started buffaloes, cows and seabirds inhabited this space. Before the riverfront requalification took place big efforts have been carried out in the planning of the city for the inclusion of animals: the roots lay in the founding years of the city, when animals were essential for agriculture and transport. But this was never the only reason for their intertwined life with the human kind. Close to the east riverside, over the bridge, the Shree Jagannathij Temple is hidden in the network of small streets and alleys. It's known as the elephant temple. Elephants are worshipped in the name of Lord Ganesha, a very popular hindu God with an elephant head and a human body. In a big field, behind the main buildings, elephants are fed breakfast every morning and given a bath. During celebrations, their skin gets painted with bright colours and they take part to a ritual procession. During these days the old city gets tinged in red, Ganesha's favourite colour, and bananas and *ladoo* are offered to the God. It is common to see them walk

in the streets overlooking the vehicles while they carry grass and branches to the temple where they live.

There is, of course, big respect towards animals and spirituality in India. It is habitual to treat life with affection, devotion and *pietas* - meaning a deep, reverential devotion towards what is considered sacred and holy. With abundance, care is given to the living proofs of deities despite the scarcity of prosperity and wealth. The Indian life is made of *rituals*: a formula of precise activities carried out collectively that dictates the daily life in the metropolis. It's not possible to question these, since they became and are still part of the traditional celebration of life. The peculiar attention and religiosity with which they're carried out every day lifts their intention to the highest spiritual level. There is no reason why, for example, *panch* members still gather money and donations to purchase grains to feed the birds that find shelter in the *chabutras*, structures built for them in the *pols* of the Old city. They know well, the birds would be capable to find nourishment, but their faith is something that makes humanity kin to all the other living beings: "a bull, [for example] is more than a bull, he is a potential grandfather" (J.L. Kipling, 1904).

The driver leaves me at Manek Chowk, one of the squares embedded in the intricate system of roads. I hand the money to kaka and step out the rickshaw. Birds are hiding in the *jalīs* of Jama Masjid, two monkeys are running on the electrical wires balancing their moves while they try to reach a house's terrace. While I slowly sip my chai in a corner of the square, I think of where I find



^An elephant reaches the temple for celebrations
Ahmedabad, early morning
2018
Personal Archive
Leicaflex SL

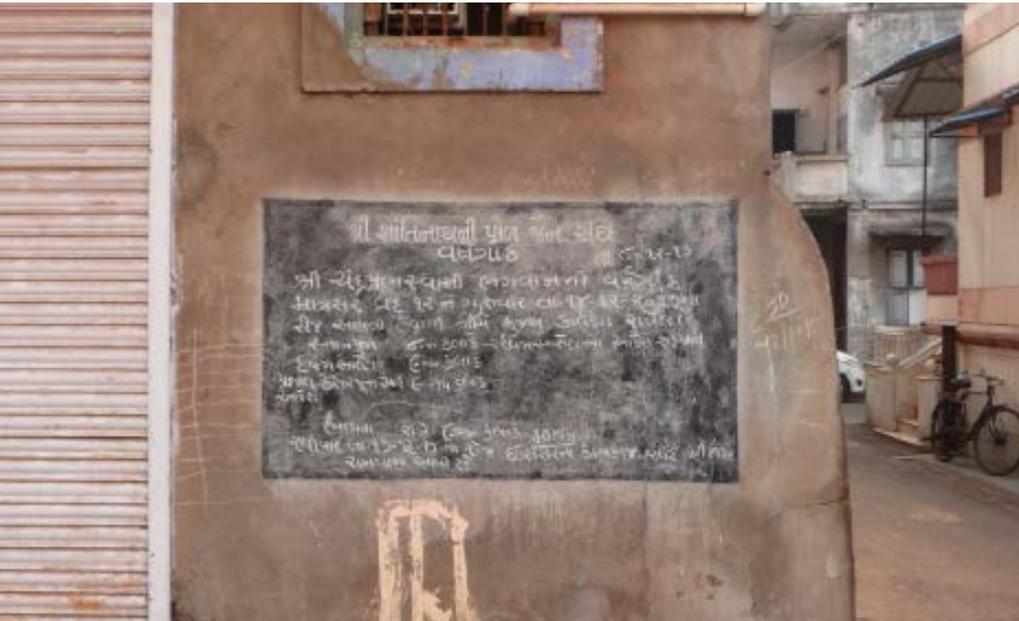
myself: surrounded by animals, in a place that is hard to believe would have been able to include them. What is nature, if not something free from human action and corruption? What are cities, if not spaces emancipated from the irrational wilderness and ferocity of the beasts? Our understanding of cities as something spoiled and artificial, counterposed to the virginity of forests and land not touched by humanity breaks apart here. In Darwin Comes to Town: How the Urban Jungle Drives Evolution, M. Schilthuizen introduces another way of looking at cities: urban development and construction is just another “fully natural phenomenon” (M. Schilthuizen, 2018) as the ones of ants, beavers or termites building their nests. These two distinct worlds, the artificial and the natural, are one whole. In cities, they interact everyday just under our sight but at such a small scale that we don’t even fully notice it. They both adapt to the growth and evolution of the other, exchanging vital pulses.

I like to call Ahmedabad the *backwards world*. It is difficult to overcome the notions of right or wrong and the prejudices about misplacement. Here, nature breaths along with the giant rusty city-machine, and pulses and pants trying to keep up the pace with the everyday changing environment, encouraged by the celebration and respect for life, even though it is sometimes not profiting the animal, yet always performed with honesty and sweet ingenuity¹⁴.

¹⁴ *I'd like to end my essay quoting J.L. Kipling, an English man that spent most of his life in India. "There are admirable points in the ritual respect for life, but it is not true humanity, nor is it practised with sufficient intelligence or feeling to profit the animal." (J.L. Kipling, 1904)*

> *Goats looking for food in the trash
Varanasi
2018
Personal Archive*





Aamras: fresh mango juice, served in the summer months

Bahia: literally, brother. It is used to address in an informal way a young man

Beedi: thin rolled cigarettes without filter. They are hand-wrapped in a leaf and closed by a thread. Cheaper than cigarettes, they are smoked by workers and rickshaw-wallahs

Bungalow (or bungalow): detached family house with a garden and terrace, to be found in residential neighbourhoods

Chabutra: tower-like structure for feeding birds. Mostly to be found in cities and villages of Gujarat

Chai: tea and milk based hot drink. It is sold in stalls all over the city. It is usually served in terracotta cups that are smashed on the ground once the drink is finished. Every family or chai-wallah has its own secret recipe, the only way to find your favourite, is to taste them all!

Ghee: clarified cow butter, abundantly used in Indian traditional kitchen and often gifted to the gods because of its nourishing qualities

Jalis: stone perforated with intricate patterns. To be found especially in mosques and traditional dwellings. It allows a constant flux of air and guarantees shaded spots

Kabaddi: traditional Indian game played in teams in a sand field

Kaka: literally, uncle. It is used to address in an informal way a man that is older than you

Lassi: yogurt-based drink, often enriched with fruits, nuts and spices. Served in a terracotta pot

Ladoo: traditional sweet made of ghee and sugar, often offered as a worship gift

Nahi: no

Neem tree: tall tree worshipped by Hindus for its curative effects

Otla: architectural typology of threshold typical of Gujarat's architecture

Pan (or paan): mouth freshener. Several aromas and ingredients are wrapped in a betel leaf and then slowly chewed and spat out

Panch: aggregation of neighbours living in the same pol

Pol: traditional urban layout of the old cities of Gujarat

Puja gift: gifts offered to the icons of the deities, usually related to the taste of the gods and goddesses, for example coconuts, grains, spices or flowers

Tuktuk: synonym for Autorickshaw

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