CHAPTER 2

Apprehending Air-Breath

A Post-COVID Political Aesthetic

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Searing photographs, etched into post-COVID corneas. In one, the Old Seemapuri crematorium in Ghaziabad, Delhi, simmers (Figure 2.1); in the other, phantom figures clad in personal protective equipment (PPE) resolutely witness a cremation (Figure 2.2). The two images are part of the sprawling archive in feature photography documenting the manmade disaster that was India's COVID second wave (April–May 2021). But this is not any feature photography. The photographs were taken by Danish Siddiqui and Adnan Abidi, both credentialed Reuters photographers based in New Delhi, who were among four Indian journalists to win the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography in 2022. Later in the chapter, I will turn to a third prize-winning photographer Amit Dave's documentation of medical oxygen shortages. But I start with this genre of images, 'crematoria images', because they persist as the *afterimage* of India's COVID experience. To be sure, the airborne disaster that was COVID galvanized a whole slew of 'air-breath' images. Yet, aesthetically placing the viewer at an eschatological threshold, the crematoria images were particularly haunting as a constant reminder of death become quotidian in the city. Like iconic images that accumulate sensory-affective intensities in circulation, the crematoria images began to quilt together all other air-breath images: they have come to function as the lasting impression, an afterimage burned into the cornea. Even today, post-COVID, post-catastrophic mass death from acute infection, these images continue to induce fear, anxiety, even foreboding, about losing air-breath, losing community, losing creaturely existence.

I characterize the sense of endangerment that stalks viewing such images *apprehension* (Ghosh 2023b).[1] My chapter explores the politics of apprehension in photographic images of catastrophe. Such an argument shifts the analytic gaze from what appears in/as the photographic *image* to

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Figure 2.1 Mass cremations at the Old Seemapuri crematorium, Ghaziabad, Delhi, 22 April 2021

Source: Screenshot of drone footage; credit: Danish Siddiqui.



Figure 2.2 Relatives wearing PPE at the cremation, New Delhi, 21 April 2021

Source: Press photo; credit: Adnan Abidi.

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the photographic *relations* of production, distribution, and reception. The shift underlies my central queries: What can the apprehensive approach to photographic images of collective trauma incite? As a mode of perception oriented towards illegible or partial visuality, can apprehensions of air-breath (in this case) be fertile ground for a respiratory politics?

As opening incitements, these photographs represent highly localized pandemic experiences of air-breath. The first is a still from Danish Siddiqui's drone footage of the Seemapuri crematorium that provided unerring evidence of a massive escalation of deaths in April 2021. That Siddiqui was a credentialed photographer working with the Reuters multimedia team in Delhi made the drone image credible at a time the Narendra Modi government refused to acknowledge the scale of devastation.[2] The photograph from the drone image as well as the drone footage (later uploaded on the Reuters Graphics platform under 'COVID-19 in India' [Reuters Graphics 2021]) went viral, eliciting a response from Modi government fans who accused Siddiqui of 'insensitivity' in filming pyres. But then, Siddiqui was no favourite because of his earlier capture of Hindu mobs beating unarmed Muslims in the northeast Delhi riots of 2020 that preceded the pandemic lockdown of March 2020 (Paul 2020). When Siddiqui died later that year, while covering Afghan and Taliban force skirmishes on the border of Pakistan, the Modi *bhakt*s ghoulishly saw his death as bad karma, and the silence from the prime minister's office was resounding (Vora 2021). These politics made Siddiqui's photographs iconic as necessary exposés that challenged state indifference. At the time when the aerial footage appeared, the drone captured the crematorium and its *extension* into an adjacent empty lot that had been cleared of trees and shrubs. As we know, not only makeshift crematoria but also the demand for wood to fuel funeral pyres placed the city's trees at high risk. Indeed, at the height of the second wave, the forest department had to issue special permissions for the felling of trees to meet the impossible demand for firewood (Roy 2021). On the Reuters Graphic platform, Siddiqui's footage was mobilized to trace the loss of vegetation by diagrammatically marking a 'before' and 'after' to the extension. Simultaneously, images of searing tongues leaping at the multi-storeyed building next to the cleared ground terrified local residents. Across global media platforms, as the image went viral, viewers apprehended the stench of mass death. There is much to say about the *unprecedented* virality of some images, as I have argued in the case of the Aylan Kurdi photograph that encapsulated the Syrian refugee crisis in September 2015 (Ghosh 2020). Among huge image banks, one 'affective image' can capture the imagination like no other. It flashes up,

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as Walter Benjamin suggests, from the horizontal movement of images to linger as the sensory impress of harm. As one of the earliest to gather scattered personal experiences of loss from COVID infection *into* an image of catastrophic (mass) death, Siddiqui's photograph had phenomenological heft and revelatory power. Its instantaneous accumulation of symbolic resonance in the age of viral spreads made it significant as a record of both an intensely local experience and an unfolding global tragedy.

Adnan Abidi's photograph is of different aesthetic tenor. The exquisite composition places spectral, PPE-clad figures *behind* the funeral pyre (relayed by the anchoring caption) in close proximity to the vivid, licking flames bursting beyond the photographic frame. The figures appear physically consumed by flames and hollowed by grief and loss as they perform the last rites. Without any depth-of-field or semiotic codes that situate this event within a location, the photograph is formally visual-haptic, enclosing viewers 'in' the intensities of heat. Arguably, the arraignments of depth, colour, and framing still the tragedy, offering it up as an aesthetic composition that 'fabricates'—assembles, frames, arranges—COVID deaths. And, in this aestheticization, viewers occupy the comforts of 'distant suffering' (Boltanski 2009). Yet the partial humanoid forms in close-up and too close to the fire in the foreground also compel curiosity about the photographic act: who was the photographer who shot the figures from the other side? Probing the photographic event, the viewer encounters the belly of the beast: the smoke-intensive, scorching crematoria grounds, rife with infection amid mounting ashes. Almost always, as we shall see later, this is a *genre* of photographs, all featuring hazmat-clad figures who stand witness to collective trauma. A month after the photograph was taken, Abidi spoke about his photographic relation to the actual occurrence he had captured on camera in an interview:

> I saw an entire family wearing PPE suits as they came to create their family member. In the photo, they are standing behind the dead person's body, holding each other, as I look at them through the flames. I had asked their permission to shoot when they were coming in. But when I clicked that picture, they couldn't see me because of the heat. It was really not easy to click that picture. The heat was so much that I couldn't even stay there for ten seconds—I clicked and then came back rubbing my hands. (Darrach 2021)

Here, Abidi's account of the photographic relation between subject and image addresses viewer curiosity about the status of the photograph. It gestures towards a then-emergent affective experience, indicating

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physical cost to the photographer. Like Siddiqui, Abidi's stature as a prize-winning photographer authorized the indexicality of the photograph. After all, viewers familiar with Abidi's work (or if you just googled him) would know his daring capture of the Rohingya exodus of 2018 and the Hong Kong protests of 2020. But even for those not in the know, arguably the pandemic experience would *intensify* the sensory-affective force of the photograph in which air was potently visible, and PPE triggered embodied fears of harm from acute infection. Such a claim begins with the assumption that the accumulative experiential intensities of mass death during this *airborne* pandemic organizes the viewing sensorium—then and now.

I will argue that the 'traumatic air-breath images' exemplified by these photographs *continue to* galvanize the apprehensive mode in viewers. While COVID catastrophic deaths are by now historical memory, embodied perceptions of lived harm lodged in implicit memory linger, perceptions triggered by traumatic air-breath images. I will expand on implicit memory shortly but, here, my point concerns this untimeliness of traumatic air-breath images. Like all trauma, if the pandemic unfolds discontinuously in time, surfacing uninvited, then the 'post' in the 'post-COVID' of this chapter's title does not convey an 'after' that safely consigns catastrophic loss to a manageable past. Rather, the 'post' suggests how those losses continue to fuel desires, even aspirations, for liveable futures.

To speak of such desire and aspiration suggests a politics of apprehension. At the core of this claim is an understanding of the *photograph as an event* and not just the technical capture of an actual occurrence. Decades of visual culture criticism have established photographs as never just evidence but aesthetic representations of actual occurrences. Despite all truth-claims, the photographic image is a fabrication because it technically and aesthetically assembles what the camera captures—before and after the shot. Arielle Azoulay's (2019) discussion of the photographic event is of particular relevance to the COVID crematoria photographs because of her concern with images of large-scale 'regime-made disasters' (like wars, famines, epidemics, or forced displacement). Azoulay notes that a photographic image 'could never exhaust on its own' the *fabricated phenomenal field* of the photographic event (2019: 304). That event is not just the composed 'actual occurrence' but also the taking, making, and viewing of the photograph as well as its present and future circulation. Take, for example, the Abidi photograph. The 'fabricated phenomenal field' of the photographic image sizzles with leaping flames, smoky haze, and spectral figures, jogging embodied memories of trauma. The variousness of trauma suggests that

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the phenomenological experiences of the image are inexhaustible. As viewers assemble into the visual field, the unfinished nature of trauma might compel questions about the event: Who survived and who did not? How did survivors commune with the dead? How must they/we live on? Accompanying these questions is curiosity about photographic relations: Who took the photograph and under what conditions? What are the limits of the visual field in the photograph? What remains unknowable or inaccessible? What was the photograph never taken? For Azoulay, such speculation incites the 'potential political history' of 'others with whom we share our world' but who appear as the sufferers, the victims, the dead (2019: 304). Creative speculation arises from experiential intensities, sometimes prompted by what is partial or the illegible 'in' the photographic image. To grasp/prehend what is not as-yet *there* is one axis of apprehension; the other is apprehension as technical capture. Both axes operate in the photographic image. A politics of apprehension lies in the making of potential histories which can be critical of the regimes that *made* the disaster and therein to galvanize what is to be done about them and/or without them.

This labour of potentiation is apparent in artistic practices that self-consciously materialize potential history in the visual field. As a counterpoint to the crematoria feature-photography comes Pallavi Paul's Salt Moon (2023) installation at the Gropius Bau Berlin, where visitors must enter the six-room exhibit through a graveyard. Later in the exhibit, we learn the images projected on the headstones in a darkened room are from Delhi Gate Cemetery, which is the largest Islamic cemetery in the area. As visitors encounter the dead, they are immersed in ecological connections—plants, insects, birds, minerals. Another history emerges of the individual lifespan. Elsewhere in the exhibit, Paul's experimental documentary *How Love Moves* (2023) follows a grave keeper, Shamim Khan, the last companion for those put to rest at the Delhi Gate Cemetery. Through five chapters marking Islamic prayer times, Paul meditates on these timespans of breath, jolted and interrupted by India's second wave of feverish 'breathlessness and fear' (Gropius Bau 2024). Her immersive installations apprehend COVID air-breath visualities as universal (as synchronicity) and particular (as local and culturally particular). While such labours are exemplary instantiations of potential history, what can we expect from viewers across walks of life? The chapter moves towards some possibilities by turning to quotidian COVID images that contributed to the feverish screen-scapes during the lockdowns. To pause on them is to question why some images might be lifted from these image streams to become afterimages of the pandemic.

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A Post-COVID Political Aesthetic

That the COVID pandemic felt like a feverish dreamscape is not too grand a claim. Despite differentials in epidemic intensities all over the world, all with access to the unrelenting stream of images 'felt' the virus touch in their bodies and environments, in daily rituals and extraordinary measures to control and regulate air becoming breath. To be sure, those with access to screen media encountered the rhizomatic unrepresentable horizontal movement of images.[3] Part of the COVID glossary online exhibit that sought to collect the 'altered' and 'newly emerged' values, concepts, and practices after the March 2020 lockdown in India, Vastavikta Bhagat's 'Death and Desperation' (2021) encapsulated the information flows that had become everyday encounter (see visualization of screen phantasmagoria in Figure 2.3).[4] Such archives of localized pandemic experiences foreground a restructured techno-social milieu that became the 'outside' to isolated, and sometimes claustrophobic, home environs. Alertness and anxiety, fear and foreboding accompanied digital signals of harm—calls for help, misinformation on oxygen supply, news of deaths—in the collective scramble for life.

In the blur of image cultures, for reasons I explore shortly, smoke rising from funeral pyres in crematoria images stand out by virtue of their visual-haptic force. My argument on the sensory impress of crematoria images

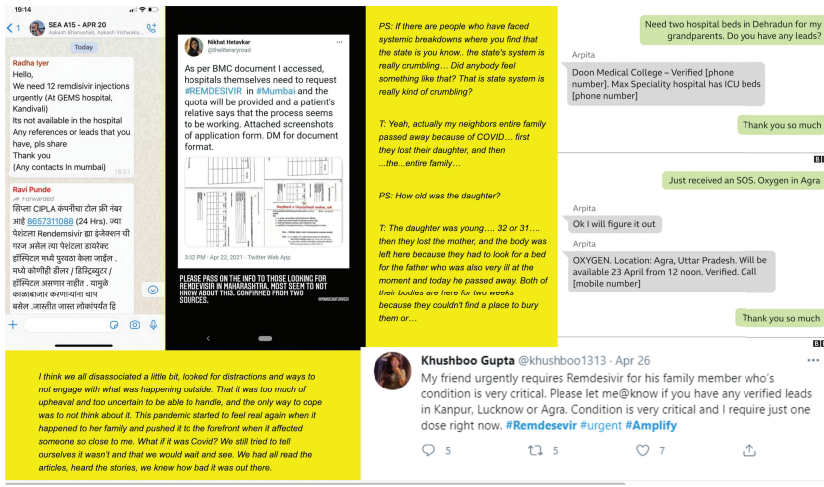


Figure 2.3 Vastavikta Bhagat, 'Death and Desperation', 2021; screenshot, COVID Glossary Online Exhibit (accessed 1 July 2024)

Source: Screenshot of screen; credit: SEA Mumbai.

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mobilizes Zahid Chaudhary's theorization of the camera as 'an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight' (2016: 25). Refusing an iconophobic approach to colonial photography, Chaudhury insists on photographs as bodily engagements, on the part of both the photographer and the viewer. Photographs of traumatic events, he argues, persist as the indelible sensory impress that lingers long after the event. With reference to cinema, Francesco Casetti suggests that well-composed elements within the photographic frame might convey particular times, spaces, and energies, creating 'a safe reconnection with the world', but there is also the 'fold' of lived viewer experience that brings back historical contingency (2023: 14). Following this line of thinking, I maintain that the time-space of the pandemic emerges *between photographer and viewer*, partly comprehensible 'in' images and partly apprehensible as embodied air-breath trauma—a shared trauma despite varying epidemic intensities.

In that fold of experience, images of catastrophic death jog the sensorium like no other, rousing feelings of loss or coming harm. Feeling out-of-breath, losing breath was a horizon for all, feelings further exacerbated with the delta variant and the medical oxygen supply crisis during India's second wave. Crematoria images generated such a *sense of endangerment* because they draw attention to two shared harms: the sense of suffocation in thickening air and the possibility of death from lack of air. Hence, culturally particular as these images were to Hindu death rituals, they stabilized as the afterimage of India's second wave. To make this claim assumes the *accumulation* of affects around these images, those pre-personal intensities that accrue force in the embodied mind. Affects are pre-personal because they respond to external stimuli before conscious recognition of stimuli as particular objects: one's lungs throw a spasm when a shadow looms in an alley or one hears the screech of brakes too close for comfort. One *implicitly* perceives stimuli one has encountered before, a perception distributed through sensory and motor systems. In looking at habitual media, Wendy Chun (2016) elaborates this distribution at work in media habits (liking, retweeting, sharing) by drawing on neurobiologist Eric R. Krandel's (2007) distinction between explicit memory (long-term memory lodged in the brain) and implicit memory (lodged in sensory-motor systems). Habitual responses, argues Chun, arise from implicit memory: they are a form of knowing without knowing. There are no memories *stored* that can be retrieved; rather, habitual responses reconfigure and reinforce past selves/experiences in acts of constant care that look not to the past (what must be preserved) but to the future (what enables survival). Habitual responses

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may seem to be desensitized, disengaged micro-actions in the response to external stimuli, and especially to noxious signals. But if we think of habitual responses as protective, arising from distributed perceptions between sensory, motor, and technological systems, then they are active engagements with the social-technological milieus.

I have made this argument elsewhere vis-à-vis iconic images of injury. The icon is a cultural mnemonic: an artifactual graphic sign, it appears natural because of its *habituation* in implicit memory. As such, icons call forth habitual responses, ranging from disgust to devotion. But because it is a shared cultural mnemonic, iconic images also belong to collective memory. In the case of the Aylan Kurdi image, for example, the image triggered an explosion of response *because* of the collective habituation to images of injured children. Historically, as we see in the case of Gaza, images of injured children are exemplars of the general state of injury; they arouse protective drives, ranging from deep anxiety to horror. Cultural habituation aside, the injured child further activates implicit memories—the 'scars' and 'remnants' of past experience, that 'we know without knowing'. As such, these images initiate the apprehensive mode. One may make a similar case for images of mass death during the COVID pandemic as implicit memory, triggering habitual responses to felt injuries and imminent danger. Post-COVID air-breath visualities all mobilize implicit memories of the airborne disaster. As Pallavi Paul puts it, in these visualities, the 'breath of those who exist, the breath of those to come and the breath of those who have departed will together speak to the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic that has arguably altered the world forever' (Pallavi Paul in Gropius Bau press release [Gropius Bau 2024]).

But all air-breath visualities are not images of catastrophe. They are heterogeneous: abstract, scientific climatic media, aerial drone footage, glossy feature photography, experimental documentary, to name just a few genres. As media forms, they are discontinuous in theme and aesthetic convention, platform, and target audience: hence, they are best described as separate *image clusters*. The unfolding COVID catastrophe underwrites the logical relation between these separate clusters—say, between 'clean air' and 'medical oxygen cylinder' images—establishing a formal syntax for COVID's air-breath aesthetic. I explore the point by plotting, in this chapter, a particular political aesthetic for Delhi's COVID experience. Further, among the image clusters salient to this pandemic experience, some operate as 'powerful cultural symbols', as Ernesto Laclau once argued in *On Populist Reason* (2005), that 'quilt together' all others.[5] In this case, as I have argued, the crematoria images function this way within the broader spectrum of

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air-breath visualities. Laclau's formulation points to what photographs induce beyond what is readily legible by way of semiotic codes or extant aesthetic convention. Beyond legibility lies the distribution of the sensible, as Jacques Rancière might have it in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004)—those affects and sensations partitioned away from the image proper. Viewers intuit, feel, and anticipate the living milieu of the pandemic experience, straining to apprehend time-spaces inaccessible within air-breath visible in the photographic frame.

This sensory-affective orientation—apprehensions of air-breath—operates as the bulwark against a historical amnesia that relegates India's second wave to the dustbin of history. To recirculate such images is to participate in the ongoing COVID 'wake', to recall Christina Sharpe, that qualitatively 'accounts' for the uncounted dead as a matter of historical record. Scholarly inquiry that insists on returning images of mass catastrophe participates in the wake for COVID's 'preventable and premature' deaths (Sharpe 2016). Conjugating air-breath images drawn from Delhi's experience of COVID-19, I elaborate a *political aesthetic* to ask: How are these photographs calls to action? What respiratory politics can they mobilize?

Alter-life Synchronies

The COVID pandemic has forced us to 'see' air as an all-too-transitive medium for the transport of SARS-CoV2.[6] Viruses lack locomotion; we know from epidemiological studies that viruses rely on air, water, or soil for transport, hitching a ride on life-sustaining environments for human and microbial life. This is why the air between us suddenly appeared as a dangerous medium as did the breath of the other—even at 6 feet distances. Tied as they are to their site of original production, vital media like blood, faeces, or breath are avowedly transitive, a realization reiterated during acute infectious disease epidemics; they habitually breach boundaries between individuals, between populations, and between species. The hyphen in the 'air-breath complex' signals the contiguities of vital media, for breathing is not just embodied inhalation, as Tim Ingold notes, but also vaporized exhalation. The air-breath complex, then, indexes the continuities of a planetary medium (air) and the contiguities of a vital one (breath). We perceive a double movement, intensive (into the lung) and extensive (the air between bodies). The idea of the 'complex' further suggests the industrial infrastructure: the technological ensembles that regulate and condition air and breath were on full display during the second wave disaster in the furor over medical oxygen-generating plants, cylinders, filling stations, and

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transportation. The complex as psychological notation also implies the experiential dimension, the workings of implicit memory in restructuring time-spaces of the pandemic

The 'we' in my articulation suggests a globally synchronous experience. India's second wave as my point of departure, however, foregrounds differentials in the COVID experience, which I characterize as epidemic intensities. To begin with, thinking differentially attends to *national specificities* in a period when nation-state boundaries firmed up, governing resource distribution, health policy, and infrastructural management. Furthermore, pandemic differentials attend to spatially localized effects emerging with disrupted connectivity—everything from transportation to global supply chains. While COVID was undoubtedly globally synchronous, the pandemic was experientially different in its *intensities* for formally or informally constituted local communities who had to make do with what they had where they were. In other words, even the historical particularity of national difference, resonant in the phrase 'India's second wave', does not quite capture *how* the mass tragedy materialized differentially across the nation. The capital of the nation, Delhi, was one of the worst hit localities, in part because of the unavailability of direct pipeline supply of oxygen to hospitals in this region of the country; most of the medical oxygen-generating plants were located in the eastern parts. It is this differential that I pause on to further explore how potential histories might open towards situated respiratory politics.

Of course, difference comes in many sizes. That the second wave unfolded as a catastrophe in Delhi, the nation's capital, raised alarm about what was happening (perhaps unreported) elsewhere in the country and what was coming. As a sentinel event, one image cluster that quixotically mapped the sudden emergence of clean air generalized Delhi *as* India (Ghosh 2023). These images centred India Gate within the frame to feature air sans pollution, bringing with it a ferocious twin—air made in industrial metabolism, heavy with particles, distressing our lungs (Figure 2.4). CNN's temporal dissolve from hazy environs to clear surrounds arraigned the India Gate photograph within other photojournalistic visualizations of breathable air, breathable precisely when it disappears visually. The genre organized air around iconic images such as the Eiffel Tower, the Venice canals, or Rio's Christ the Redeemer, instantly instituting geographic difference; at the same time, the equivalence generated by their serial flow universalized utopic possibilities amid a global health emergency.

What such air-breath images articulate are shared perceptions of living altered after the COVID pandemic. But not all alter-life experiences are the same as theorists of the chemosphere note. Epidemic intensity

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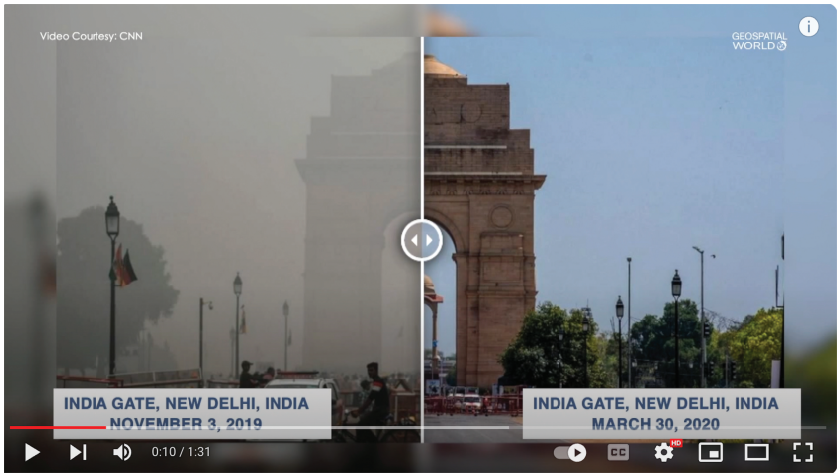


Figure 2.4 Seeing air at the India Gate, 16 March 2021

Source: Screenshot from CNN News.

captures differential vulnerabilities in the pandemic experience, for 'intensity' is always a *comparative measure or feeling*. My emphasis on pandemic differentials draws on decolonial theorist Michelle Murphy's (2017) insistence on a dual analytic focus on biochemical alterations at a molecular scale alongside structural relations (racial, colonial, industrial) that colonize molecules. Only then can we approach the extensive and entangled relations of those who live precarious 'alter-lives' because of their long-term exposure to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), hormones, and soil contaminants—living in neighbourhoods next to toxic wastes and in sick buildings or living with highly industrialized food supplies. Right before the pandemic, the Environmental Committee of the Forum of the International Respiratory Societies made the case for air pollution as one form of health inequality and environmental injustice arising alongside long-term inadequate healthcare provision, food insecurity, unregulated housing, and toxic water infrastructure, to name just a few factors (Schraufnagel et al. 2019). Studying what it means to live altered, then, 'requires bursting open the categories of organism, individual, and body to acknowledge a shared, entangling, and extensive condition of being' (Murphy 2017: 494). Even as we speculate our chemical or microbial relations, 'alterlife' reorients us to 'life otherwise', of another kind of future. One might wonder what that might be for India's COVID experience: What respiratory politics are afoot in imagining breathable air?

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More broadly, these reflections on the role of air-breath visualities offer 'epidemic intensities' as the conceptual architecture for the pandemic experience. In its etymologies, 'intensity' has spatial resonance as the feeling of *stretching tight* between two coordinates. During the airborne pandemic, we all felt tensioned between dangerous air rushing *into* our lungs even as we sought *out* oxygen from our surrounds. As perceptions of the risk environment grow, intensity suggests an *accumulation*, a piling on, a growing density. When scientific images render air/breath calculable, intensity might be understood in its technical valence: a measure for concentrations of energy transmitted in acoustic or electromagnetic radiation, a measure including magnitude, degree, direction, or level of dilution. Despite this seeming neutrality, epidemic intensities are deeply subjective. In the domain of feeling, intensity is the thickening/layering/bundling of sensations/affects; it is a term that translates qualitative perceptions of energetic forces between things into subjective experience. Scientific, artistic, and popular images make epidemic intensities sensible, scattering breath into the air, and infusing air into breath. Something latent, something imperceptible moves between us: we understand it informationally, we sense it affectively.

Seeing Air in Climate Media

One might begin with air as an extensive planetary environment that became visible in COVID's photojournalistic spreads, audiovisual documents, and climatic media. Yuriko Furahata's elaboration of the genre is an obvious starting point for thinking about COVID's climatic media: those scientific and journalistic techniques and technologies that actively mediate and shape habitable environments. As Furahata notes, climatic media span a range that includes thermal imaging photographs, charts, diagrams, and other such instruments of data visualization. Further still, pressing beyond conventional media objects like film, television, telephone, internet, and social media, Furahata's media encompass natural elements like air or water. Sky media, for instance, are ensembles of atmospheric matter and their machinic inscriptions.

During COVID, one classic genre of climatic media featured clean air images. These data visualizations of the elemental medium attempted to explain what happened to the earth's atmosphere during the pandemic. Gathering information from 200 Continuous Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Stations in 115 Indian cities, one co-authored paper published in July 2020 reported a 21–47 per cent decrease in several elements such

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as nitrogen, carbon monoxide, and sulphur dioxide. The researchers transcribed city data to present national topoi: What happened to India's air, they wondered, after the 25 March lockdown? Crafted from satellite data recording the aerosol optical depth (AOD), or the measure of aerosols (urban haze, smoke particles, desert dust, sea salt) distributed within a sample column of air, the data visualizations of India's air followed the conventions of the thermal imaging photographs (see Verma and Kamyotra 2021: Fig. 3a, 'Visual Maps', and Fig. 5, 'Satellite Visuals Maps'[7]). Encoding an environmentally auspicious atmosphere, a bright green patch spreading across India, these visualizations plotted clearing air as the lockdown slowed industrial production and fossil fuel consumption. As I have argued in *The Virus Touch* (2023), scientific visualizations such as these are cultural performances in their mobilization of extant aesthetic grammars: in this case, green as the globally legible coding for better environmental futures.[8] Pitching the data for national green policies, the scientists offered the visualizations as imaginations of India's air futures. But even as these images speculated on emergent national surrounds, the planetary viewpoint from the satellite linked *India's breathable air* to universal air futures. Beyond tracking greener and greener air, the images further induced apprehensions of *other* times—that hoary past of 'normal' times when industrial air sank into our lungs.

Climatic media suggests *all creaturely life* on the blue planet are at risk but to varying degrees. One genre of COVID lockdown feature photography made the case by folding representations of planetary media (earth and sky) into unusual creaturely activity. Wild or domestic livestock wandering into once-bustling environs induced laughter, wonder, sometimes shock (*The Guardian* 2020). A pudgy sealion looked askance at a shuttered shop, mountain goats marched down deserted streets, jackals howled in urban parks—the list mounted across media spreads. Such images espoused a familiar environmental politics: animals and birds are sentinels; their fate foreshadows ours; their re-habitation of planetary environs can anticipate other futures for all living species. These images were about lockdown effects: stilled industrial urban life, rewilded empty highways, deserted neighbourhoods, and abandoned thoroughfares. But reminding humans of their creaturely existence, these feature photographs were also warnings. Will we, too, disappear, as 'they' have in the age of mass extinctions as industrial metabolism eats into life-sustaining environments? Beyond this obvious apprehension, this image cluster constellated various 'communities of air', as Shaunak Sen characterizes it in his prize-winning documentary *All That Breathes* (2022).

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Creaturely life found cartographic situations in captions and iconic signage (Ghosh 2023b). One spread in *The Guardian* gallery (published 22 April 2020) included a photograph of peahens strutting about the Motilal Nehru Marg in New Delhi ('The Urban Wild'). Consorts of the official 'national bird' of India, these birds are memorable animal media in the archives of environmental politics.[9] The national birds return in screen projections of Pallavi Paul's *Salt Moon* installation as resplendent alter-species custodians of Delhi's cemetery. As creaturely companions, the bird's grace among the dead signals the causal relatedness of all things.

Air-breath visualities in such heterogeneous climatic media are a vast repertoire. Some images invoke humour and wonder; others, like the data visualizations, address the trained eye. A large part of this image cluster was accessible across global media platforms; even multi-sited localized incentives to visualize clean air made landfall. One collaboration between the New Delhi–based India Habitat Centre (IHC) and the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and the Berkeley-based Collaborative Clean Air Policy Center (CCAPC) launched a 'Clean Air India: A Photo Contest' in September 2020 asking citizen-scientists to document clear air with 'before' and 'after' images that show striking changes in air quality. Such invitation induces participatory apprehensions of clean air in visual-haptic modality: an invitation to test the limits of the visual frame as it tries to 'capture' embodied expansions and contractions of the lung.

Feeling Breath Infrastructures

One of the haptic experiences of the COVID pandemic is awareness of the lungs, standing in for a vital infrastructure that includes the trachea, diaphragm, muscles, tonsils, mouth, and throat.[10] The lungs flash up ever-so-often as the organ under threat in visualizations of physiological states in scientific and cultural notation. Some Indian cable channels promoting folksy remedies for COVID infection mounted breathing exercise videos, touting culturally Hindu solutions to SARS CoV2's onslaught on the lungs. One instructional demo featured a schematic of inhalation-exhalation: inhaling for measured seconds, then holding one's breath and exhaling in controlled counts (*India Today* 2021). The video exemplified 'media of breathing', as John Durham Peters characterizes them: in this case, the video promoted *respiratory techniques* culled from ancient yogic practices that train the body to transform air into breath. Such vernacular media on air management and breath control proliferated across media platforms directing air-breath practices towards individuated and collective

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time-spaces, organizing bodies and environments. In them, the air-breath complex found inscription in sensory and motor memory.

Adjacent to vital infrastructure visualities came the industrial prosthetic of the lungs in the image of the medical oxygen cylinder. This part of the breath infrastructure made visible the intense breakdown of beleaguered lungs no longer capable of transforming air into breath. Concentrating 'the basic part of breathable air', as Marjin Nieuwenhuis notes, the cylinder promised more than the lungs (which filter 21 per cent of oxygen from the air) ever could; in this regard, the medical oxygen cylinder acquired the lustre of a prized techno-fix.[11] Images of medical oxygen cylinders entangled with malfunctioning lungs, with the former inducing sensory apprehensions of the very conditions of life—the *prana* and *pneuma* of ancient yore *and* the techno-industrial promise of life-saving medical infrastructure (Albano 2022: 6–7). As such images circulated vertiginously, they accumulated intense affects.

A third photographer who won the Pulitzer for feature photography in 2022, Amit Dave, captured the breath infrastructure crisis in hospitals, on the streets, and in factories: Figure 2.5, shot in a factory in Ahmedabad, represents this image cluster as it foregrounded hoarding and scarcity.



Figure 2.5 People filling oxygen cylinders, 24 April 2021

Source: Press photo; credit: Amit Dave.

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The image of plentiful supply would invoke both longing and anger at the time of its circulation in April 2021, when the air had thickened with crematoria smoke and bodies floated down the Ganges. Photographs of cylinders stacked in storage rooms, rusty but ready, rubbed shoulders with their deployment in makeshift breathing outfits at gurdwaras or in autorickshaws; a litany of media forms captured cylinders in transit on all modes of transport—in cars and taxis, clasped against bodies, rolled on carts. As news casters pondered delays, detours, and supply chain logistics, the cylinder became *the* dominant icon of the breath infrastructure, infusing its image with desire. Such photographs drew attention to hitherto invisible technological ensembles and the logistics of delivery. As such, they raised proverbial questions: Why did the government mismanage medical oxygen distribution? Why was medical oxygen *not* vital commons that, in Lauren Berlant's (2016) terms, holds and organizes 'common life'? To ask such questions was to formulate a nascent respiratory politics.

When it was visually missing in the countless pleas for medical oxygen circulating on WhatsApp, the cylinder signalled differential access to healthcare in a nation where less than 1–1.15 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) is allotted for the health sector (Ruby Dhar et al. 202:1 4382). Those reliant on state-run healthcare found themselves consigned to premature and preventable death. Unsurprisingly, a brisk black market emerged around the medical oxygen cylinder as the most-vaunted industrial commodity. Across north, west, and central India, small cylinders (that mountaineers use) were selling for INR 25,000 (USD 300), while the actual cost was INR 1,000 (USD 12). Those who could afford it bought oxygen concentrators typically priced at INR 35,000–40,000 (USD 420–480) for as much as INR 100,000 (USD 1,200). As images of heaving chests and gasping mouths proliferated on global media platforms, grassroots relief organizations, government organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) hustled for medical oxygen. In these efforts, the medical oxygen cylinder instantiated a social rupture in the extreme: those who could afford it commandeered it, while others slated for preventable and premature death became the countless 'human interest stories' in the historical record of loss. With unerring accuracy, Arundhati Roy described the impossible demand placed on the most vulnerable at the mercy of the free market for their survival:

> At the bottom end of the free market, a bribe to sneak a last look at your loved one, bagged and stacked in a hospital mortuary. A surcharge for a priest who agrees to say the final prayers. Online medical consultancies in

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> which desperate families are fleeced by ruthless doctors. At the top end, you might need to sell your land and home and use up every last rupee for treatment at a private hospital. Just the deposit alone, before they even agree to admit you, could set your family back a couple of generations. (Roy 2021)

There are volumes written about the medical oxygen crisis that flesh a respiratory politics, which I cannot cover in a chapter. But in short, amid a furor over scarcities, a classic naturalizing move blamed the disaster on the sudden emergence of an especially deadly and contagious mutation, the delta variant; moreover, they argued that it was the sheer scale and density of India's population that had turned raging infection deadly on a mass scale.[12] And yet there is no getting past the 'missing' Modi government for three weeks as officials contested the insufficiency in the national medical oxygen supply. Close allies of the prime minister, such as the thanatopolitical Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath ordered property seizures of those who 'spread rumors' about the lack of oxygen supply (Rashid 2021). These censoring tactics enacted the epistemic violence that rendered the photographs documenting the second wave historically significant.

These politics were profoundly brought home in photographs of medical oxygen cylinders complementing the steady stream of text messages that ranged from calls for help to disinformation (false supply numbers). Like other photographs, the trouble with breath during COVID as illness lent these images visual-haptic and affective heft. More crucially, the 'medical oxygen cylinder' opened viewers to the industrial infrastructure as technological ensemble, always visible, as infrastructure theorists note, at moments of breakdown and failure. Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star's (1999) understanding of infrastructure as a mixture of the physical and the symbolic begs the question: What does it mean to constitute the 'medical oxygen cylinder' as an object? In market terms, the image sells a commodity. But when the commodity becomes inaccessible, the image signals the system of relations, socio-economic and technological, that produce it. At the point of breakdown and failure, the classificatory desire to separate the medical oxygen cylinder as an object alienated from its industrial production wavers; it becomes an industrial ensemble and site of social exchange (Larkin 2008). Thus, longings for the medical oxygen cylinder in implicit memory index malfunctioning lungs as much as manufacturing paucities and supply chain breakdowns. To put it in Arielle Azoulay's (2019) terms, the photographic relation can open viewers to test the limits of the frame. There, new questions arise: Where is the cylinder to be found? Is it full or half empty? How can it be transported and how quickly? How much does

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it cost on the black market? One cannot anticipate the probing of the image in the viewing event. But one can surmise that, then and now, these images can rouse apprehensions of indelible harm. In turn, that apprehension can compel a potential history of the medical oxygen cylinder: a questioning of industrial, a censure of absent governance, a social critique of those who found relief and the countless others without access or remedy. To ask such questions of a photograph enacts potential history, one which recognizes those 'others' that surround the photographic frame.

But who are the amorphous others slated for premature and preventable death? With the state refusal to count COVID-related deaths, what other indices signal 'their' presence? Here, the crematoria images yield more than just news of mass death. I return to them to think beyond the visual-haptic apprehension of losing air-breath.

A Politics of Apprehension

Let us return to another photograph by Adnan Abidi that offers a characteristically impressionistic view and highlights the stark loneliness accompanying mass death (Figure 2.6). The blurriness of smoke habitually



Figure 2.6 Smoke clearing from the crematorium, 25 April 2021

Source: Press photo; credit: Adnan Abidi.

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obscures the particularity of location, which is somewhat vaguely captured (or not) in the captions ('India coronavirus') (BBC News 2021). Ironically, the caption for this photograph is 'smoke clearing from the crematorium'. The lack of visual or textual concretion makes the images all the more portable: viewers can enter a 'fabricated phenomenal field' (pace Azoulay) as a proximal site to remember constriction in the lungs and the coming harm. At the same time, viewers apprehend *missing* dead bodies, invisible in the smoky thickness as flesh becomes air. During the second wave, the photographic encounter was equally an apprehension of those who died without oxygen. The confusing visibility of the photograph forgoes comprehension for affective force: one can feel the synesthetic crackle of fire and the stench choking lungs—not many Indians within and beyond India were left untouched by death become quotidian. Like the bullet-hole or weathervane gesturing towards a killing or a change in wind direction, in the famed Piercean instantiation of indexical signs, the smoke from crematoria invites a reconstruction of actual events; they gesture towards COVID-related deaths on a mass scale. As I suggested at the start of the chapter, these photographs gained symbolic significance partly *because* of government refusals of a body count. In this accretion of meanings around a core graphic, the index became iconic.[13]

Beyond the smoke and the missing dead, one core image inhabits most crematoria photographs: PPE-clad figures watching over the departures of human flesh. They are inaccessible in their anonymity, filtering present dangers of photojournalist documentation under conditions of acute infection and informatic suppression. In the work of potential history, one might dig further: Who are the humanoid figures who accompany the dead? On the one hand, they represent the utterly hazardous labour of cremation under pandemic conditions of mass death: the figures are at risk for both smoke inhalation and acute infection. With some crematoria recording 30–40 pyres an hour at the height of the second wave, one can only imagine the extreme precarity of this labour.[14] They are iconic of the scores of crematoria workers who built the pyres, burned the bodies, collected the ashes, and swept the grounds at great risk to their health. On the other, we might seek particularities: Were they regular workers or enlisted during the crisis? What class and caste communities were they from? What happened to their health after long hours? To ask is to harness the creative force of apprehension: a speculative world-making that continues to restructure the pandemic time-space of air-breath. Apprehension, in this regard, is both a politics of fear and a prehending or seizing upon the lived milieu, sometimes seeking to change its terms.[15]

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As such, the apprehensive mode tending towards potential histories can incite a sensible politics of air-breath.

If we acknowledge that epidemic intensities undergird the sensory-affective force of air-breath images in general, then crematoria images are an extreme instance of the norm. In post-COVID times, they situate viewers in the time-spaces of the pandemic experience. Those time-spaces are only partly comprehensible in the aesthetic composition. Much bleeds beyond the frame. The embodied trauma of losing air-breath lingers: in images of air-breath, we sense, feel, and intuit the pandemic's milieu as deeply local and expansively planetary. Quilting all others, the crematoria images place us at the threshold of annihilation: at the possible extinction of air/breath. From the vantage of the pathological, we are forced to make new norms: What will those be? What future anterior or contingent present is still possible? Have we truly lost air/breath as social and ecological commons?

Notes

1. Apprehension has a fascinating etymology in the addition of the 'ap' to prehension from Old French in the fourteenth century. The *ap* (in Latinate Old French) also draws on the Greek *apo*, meaning away from, in contradiction to seizing upon or holding. The etymology returns in the two senses of apprehension in this chapter: a fear/loathing/repression that turns away and a reaching/grasping that opens towards. See Ghosh (2023b).
2. Siddiqui had already won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography covering Rohingya crisis (seehttps://www.danishsiddiqui.net/rohingyas-escape), a roster that included the winning image: a woman, crouched on the Shah Porir Dwip shore, grasping sand (11 September 2017). No doubt Reuters played 'image broker', lending Siddiqui's images institutional heft. For a broader discussion of the power dynamics in such media conglomerates, see Gürsel's analysis of the social mediation of photographs: the 'acts such as commissioning, evaluating, licensing, selling, editing, and negotiating' constitutive of news photographs, some of which become iconic by the force of their distribution (Gürsel 2016: 2).
3. I thank Ravi Sundaram for underlining this point (in his editorial comments) on an unpresentable stream of images, which compelled me to clarify the distinction of traumatic images that enter the zone of the afterimage. It is a fine point and a crucial one in thinking about what becomes iconic in our saturated screen cultures.
4. COVID Glossary online exhibition (https://www.covidglossary.online/) was a collaboration between the School of Environment and Architecture

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(SEA) in Mumbai, the Goethe-Institute/Max Mueller Bhavan (Mumbai), and the Akademi de Künste Welt (Cologne).

5. In *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau outlines the operations pf populism through affective investments in symbols (like 'Joe the Plumber', for instance) that organize heterogeneous social demands.
6. This true of all airborne epidemics hailing back to Hippocrates who understood air to be the conduit of life and of disease (see Albano 2022: 5).
7. These visuals are presented in a 2021 paper co-authored by Ram Lal Verma of the Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research and Jatinder Singh Kamyotra, Director of the Central Pollution Board in Delhi.
8. See Ghosh (2023a: ch. 2) on the aesthetic grammar of scientific visualization.
9. In one of Rahul Mukherjee's (2020) stories on environmental controversies concerning radiation of all kinds, he recounts one distrustful citizen of the western India city of Jaipur who believed the electromagnetic radiation from cellphone towers caused his brother's cancer. Even after protracted battles, he refused to believe scientific evidence of fading radiation. Rather, and rather poetically, it was the 'return of peacocks to the garden' that restored his faith in emergent clean air. Creaturely life, in this local story, once more appear as sentient guardians of the damaged planet.
10. The lungs were established as part of breathing's vital infrastructure with the pneumatic experiments of the late sixteenth century (see Jean-William Fitting 2015).
11. Marjin Nieuwenhuis argues that oxygen was the modern answer to the debates over the 'pnuema' as the interface of air and the respiratory system. Named in 1789, the discovery of oxygen made for a biopolitics of air as it became possible to govern breathability. In the use of poison gas, knowledge of air would become the basis of a thanatopolitics.
12. The government protested that the demand for medical oxygen had become unreasonable: from 3,842 metric tonnes (MT) a day at the beginning of April to 11,000 MT by the start of May. This was compounded by innumerable logistical challenges arising from modes of medical oxygen delivery to hospitals, such as insufficient cryogenic tankers for liquid oxygen deliveries, inadequate filling stations for jumbo cylinders, and the safe transportation of medical oxygen tankers across state lines. A deeper read of the medical oxygen crisis, however, locates the problem in the Modi administration's selective approach to health expertise and their political commitment to private enterprise as the source of public goods. As early as September 2020, health experts had warned the administration that India's medical oxygen via direct pipeline was in short supply; if COVID infections were to increase, India was headed towards a catastrophe. Scientists marshalled data to produce

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dire estimates, forecasts, and predictions. With donations pouring in to the PM CARES fund after March 2020, in October, the administration floated tenders for the best bids for 162 pressure swing absorption (PSA) plants to manufacture pipeline medical oxygen. Mired in financial bids, eight months later, none of these plants were as yet operational.

13. See discussion of the icon's semiotic core in Ghosh (2011: ch. 2).
14. The World Health Organization's models of burning pyres noted that, during the second wave of COVID-19 in 2021, surface ozone levels were observed to be higher, which had a direct impact on lung function, thereby making people more susceptible to particulate-borne COVID infections (Manoj et al. 2022).
15. As I elaborate in *The Virus Touch*, apprehension conjures mediation as prehension, a perceptual reaching towards or grasping at ontic relationalities that are not-as-yet intelligible (Ghosh 2023a: 197–198).

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