

Dr. Ved Prakash  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Central University of Rajasthan

### **All That Breathes and All That Belongs: A Study of Air, Space, and Species in the City**

At present, as the world focuses on creating high-tech, modern, and developed cities, it becomes crucial for us to consider who inhabits, governs, and is displaced by the evolving contours of urban space. Since the Industrial Age, there has been a significant shift from the countryside to the city. While cities continue to expand to accommodate an increasing number of people/workers/humans, the question of how non-humans/birds/animals should engage with the city arises. Who gets to call the city their own? Set against the morbid, polluted urban landscape of New Delhi, the documentary *All That Breathes* (2022), directed by Shaunak Sen, argues that we are all a community of air. Sen's film shifts its focus from the land to the sky and air, attempting to build a broader argument about the coexistence of humans and non-humans. The film documents the story of two brothers, Nadeem Shehzad and Mohammad Saud, along with Salik Rehman as a helper, who have been trying to protect the black kite and other birds, which are essential to the ecosystem of New Delhi. Amidst environmental toxicity and a polluted sky, the brothers care for the injured and abandoned birds in their makeshift healing centre/hospital. This paper argues that *All That Breathes* not only highlights interspecies care but also critiques the anthropocentric structure of urban development that marginalises both non-human and vulnerable human populations. The paper examines breathing as a political and ecological right, raising questions of environmental access and

justice. Moreover, the paper examines the politics of urban belonging in contemporary Delhi, asking who is granted the right to live, breathe, and thrive in the modern city. To ground the analysis, it draws on Amita Baviskar's *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity, and the Commons in Delhi* (2020).

**Keywords:** *Ecology, Air, Breathing, Delhi*

### **Critiquing the Anthropocentric Structure of Urban Development**

As I write this paper, Delhi's AQI data reflect unhealthy, very unhealthy, and hazardous conditions. The highest AQI mark is 353.<sup>i</sup> The winter months, from November to February, are marked by significant amounts of smog and various pollutants in the air. The bourgeois class relies on air purifiers to regain a sense of normalcy; however, the working class, as well as birds and other species in Delhi, have no option but to endure and survive in the polluted air. Bruno Latour, in his work "*We Have Never Been Modern*," critiques modernity by arguing that the modernist impulse to separate objective nature from subjective society constitutes the modern constitution. Latour argues that we may need to view our world as a unit of elements that exist in relation to one another, rather than as isolated, separated, and bifurcated entities. While Latour critiques the way media and newspapers engage with society and the concept of modernity, Bavisar echoes similar sentiments when she opines that Delhi, as a city, needs to be seen in its multiplicity. A city that does not belong solely to the rich class, it is a city that emerged from the coming together of several villages. In fact, places in Delhi, such as Mahipalpur, Begampur, Puth Kalan, and Mangolpur Kurth, exist at the intersection of urban and semi-urban areas. Besides, villages in Delhi, such as Mehrauli, Munirka, Shahpur Jat, and Dhansa, are known as 'urban villages' or 'rural pockets' within the heart of the capital city.

Raymond Williams, in his work *The Country and the City*, argues that instead of viewing country/rural and city/urban as fixed categories, one needs to consider them as historically produced ideas defined by production, economic conditions, class hierarchy, power relations, and so on. Both Williams and Latour critique the purist bifurcation of country v/s the city, and nature v/s society. While examining the concept of a city as a site of liminality, Baviskar labels Delhi an uncivil city. Baviskar critiques how bourgeois environmentalism transforms urban space into a threshold where ecological rhetoric justifies exclusionary violence against the poor, migrant workers, as well as non-humans like cows, pigs, and stray dogs, etc. While bourgeois environmentalism often raises critical concerns about the ecological and aesthetic imagination of the city, it tends to overlook the everyday material practices of bourgeois consumption, such as car ownership, air-conditioning use, and food waste, that significantly contribute to environmental degradation. In such a dualism, one needs to find a common point to conceive the idea of the commons. Baviskar writes, “In an uncivil city, the commons can be a model and metaphor for creating a shared space of politics. To be open and accommodating to the needy and vulnerable, to the ants and banyan trees...to keep alive the hope that city-making can be based on social and ecological justice” (30). Baviskar elaborates further, “bourgeois environmentalism had emerged as an organised force in Delhi, and upper-class concerns around aesthetic, leisure, safety, and health had come significantly to shape the disposition of urban spaces” (35). The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) was established in 1957 with the idea of Nehruvian socialism; however, with an excessive focus on modernisation during the 1980s (Asian Games), 1990s, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Delhi began to undergo drastic changes. The industries that became an integral part of the modernisation process depended on the exploitation of the environment (Baviskar 45). Amidst this, the question that needs to be asked is what the environment means when it comes to humans and

non-humans? Do humans care about the policy of co-existence? What are some of the parameters of existence in a space like Delhi?

### **The Question of Air**

*All That Breathes* proposes a non-hierarchical view of life by rejecting distinctions between species based on their shared act of breathing. With breathing comes the question of accessing clean air. Who owns air? And why air pollution in Delhi is still considered a phenomenon that solely occurs in winter, and why there aren't any permanent solutions to resolve the issue. One could argue that, since air pollution doesn't kill one instantly, perhaps that is why the response to it is deferred and delayed. One could mention here Rob Nixon's work, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, in which the author argues that slow violence occurs gradually, often out of sight. It is a "violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Similarly, Air pollution can be seen and felt, but the devastation it brings cannot be viewed or perceived immediately; therefore, there is a denial and reluctance.

*All That Breathes* chronicles the efforts of Nadeem and Mohammad in operating an informal bird clinic in Delhi's polluted Wazirabad neighbourhood, where they rescue collapsing black kites, owls, and other birds of the city. With the backdrop of Delhi's grey sky, the film reveals the interspecies caregiving and intersecting crises. Through an immersive and observational cinematic lens, Sen's camera moves slowly, capturing long takes of air, birds, humans, and other species, such as horses, insects, cows, pigs, and tortoises. With the help of ambient soundscape (wingbeats, horns, coughs), the film documents the everyday anxieties of existence. The rooftop makeshift sanctuary of care and healing suggests that one can always envision a space of solidarity within the urban centres of living. The film opens with a long shot that focuses on life beyond humans. The camera moves across dogs and rats, then merges

with an upward angle shot looking at the sky, where one can see a bird. As the film transitions from non-humans to people, one can see Nadeem taking steam and complaining about his itchy throat, a result of Delhi's toxic air. In another scene, Mohammed and Nadeem are having dinner in a room equipped with an air purifier while discussing Delhi's air, and Nadeem takes out his phone to check the AQI and announces "700 se paar hai aaj" ("it is over 700 today"), followed by a line "sehat ke liye acchi nahi hai" ("it isn't good for health"). To this, Nadeem responds, "That is why so many birds are falling from the sky". Within the larger discourse of air or airlessness, a shocking revelation emerges: birds do not fit neatly into the universal categories through which humans understand life or nature. Even among birds, classificatory binaries, such as carnivorous and non-carnivorous, are imposed. The fact that kites are carnivorous leads many humans to refuse to treat them.

The debate concerning purity versus pollution is also extended to the birds by humans. The film argues further that Delhi's air has changed so has its metabolism. Now all species are changing and adapting to the new reality of urban life. Urban lizards have learnt to climb the walls in a different manner, and some birds fly higher in the sky to avoid the noise pollution caused by Delhi's traffic. Some kites are using cigarette butts as parasite repellents. City kites differ from rural ones. For urban kites, humans define the concept of a natural habitat for them, and this, too, can be viewed as an evolution. In the film, Salik, Nadeem, and Mohammad, while discussing the waste mountains emerging at the outskirts of Delhi, remark that it is not they who are saving the kites; in fact, the kites are saving humans by consuming waste.

### **The Question of Breathing and Belonging**

"For a subcontinent with a centuries-old obsession with matters of purity and pollution, a matrix that still organises much of social life, the problem of air pollution seems strangely inassimilable into older forms of understanding" (Baviskar 74). In *All That Breathes*, air is

directly linked with both life as well as death. While one needs clean air to live a healthier life, the very act of breathing underscores the importance of air itself. The act of breathing needs to be examined from multiple perspectives, as well as engagements. From physical, political, and social, to metaphorical, breathing can entail multiple forms of embodiment. When it comes to the question of breathing in the post-human world, it may be essential for us to ask who has the right to breathe and who has the right to live or survive? Coming from the capital city, Delhi, breathing at the moment has become a tedious task. N19 Masks covering the faces constitute the idea of the 'new normal'. While the affluent class, as mentioned earlier, can purchase high-end air purifiers to gain a sense of control over their bodies and existence, it is the working class and other non-human entities that must endure the consequences. Mar Perezts, Marianna Fotaki, Yuliya Shymko and Gazi Islam, in their article "Breathe and let breathe: Breathing as a political model organizing", argue that "Depleted air quality in the megacities systematically damages public health and the air we breathe is too quickly becoming a commodity instead of a commons. Clean air is less and less accessible to marginalised populations, particularly in the Global South, as well as to other life forms, which all depend on a variety of breathing processes that are often bound up by human activity and may be impeded by it. Breathing is therefore as much about being able to breathe as about letting others – including more than human others... Can the literal and metaphorical power of breathing help us think differently about the mutuality that underlies all forms of life and move beyond anthropocentric instrumental and extractivist outlooks in its theorising" (137). While discussing breathing, one may need to move beyond the respiratory needs of humans, which are also important, and examine the suffocation of non-humans and the planet. Breathing, apart from being considered an ecological right, also needs to be regarded as a socio-political right. How to imagine breathing in times of breathlessness and carelessness (literal as well as

metaphorical) is something that nation-states and legal institutions need to address. Moreover, breathing is directly linked with the ethics of care.

In *All That Breathes*, the breathing space for the religious minority, primarily Muslims, gets confined during the ongoing conversation around CAA. Mohammad highlights that calling one an insect or a rat is a form of othering, just as kites are otherised from other birds. Somewhere, Nadeem, Mohammed, and Salik become one with the kites, and breathing for them is no longer just a physical act of inhaling and exhaling; it becomes a political act of perseverance and resistance. To breathe is to protest, to protect the right to breathe. Rebecca Oxley and Andrew Russell, in their work, “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World”, write that, “breath needs to be understood in broader terms than the clinical, as a mode of relating to the world, engaging with others, objects, environments and technologies. These relations are fluid but have patterns and rhythms; breath can frame the pace of daily life and experience as well as being the nebulous essence of being-in-the-world” (4). While breathing defines the everyday act of existence, the bird savers of Wazirabad need to prove that they belong to Delhi as much as anyone else. The question of who belongs or doesn’t is often raised, keeping humans from dominant groups/classes at the centre of the conversation. To move beyond this narrow perspective, one must ask who has the right to belong to a place, a space, a country, a city, or the planet.

In *All That Breathes*, whether it is the land or sky, space is not owned by one species. Even the sky is not apart from humans; it is depicted as a contested and damaged space of belonging. For example, in Delhi, it is customary for people to fly kites in August to celebrate the nation’s independence. On 15<sup>th</sup> August, kites fill the sky in certain parts of Delhi. Along with celebration, the sharp thread used by humans to fly kites ends up hurting several birds. As a result, the sky is no longer seen as a romantic space, but rather as a risky one. Moreover, the film oscillates across the basement (the place where the brothers work), land, water, and the

sky. While considering the concept of nature within urban spaces, it is essential to recognise that Delhi functions not merely as a city, but as a dynamic ecosystem where multiple species coexist and interact.

## **Conclusion**

*All That Breathes* envisions a pathway toward coexistence, illustrating how humans, birds, animals, and the urban environment are intricately intertwined in a fragile balance. Through its slow, meditative camera work and minute attention to sound, visuals, and space, the film emphasises the shared vulnerability of all living beings. By focusing on the caretakers' labour and the birds' precarious survival, it suggests that ethical attention, empathy, and patience are essential for sustaining life in a damaged ecosystem. Ultimately, the film portrays space not as a neutral backdrop, but as a living, breathing environment in which every action, human or non-human, has consequences. One could conclude with what Baviskar has to say about how to conceive an idea of tomorrow/future: "The claim to speak for future generations and non-human species has so far been the prerogative of bourgeois environmentalists who have stood by and shrugged at the denial of rights and displacement of poorer people, and their actions have been precipitated. Wresting from them that privilege of speaking for the Future and Nature can only be done by new alliances that spark new ways of thinking" (26).

## References

*All That Breathes*. Directed by Shaunak Sen, HBO Documentary Films, 2022.

Baviskar, Amita. *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity and the Commons in Delhi*. SAGE Publications India, 2016.

“Delhi Air Pollution: Real-Time Air Quality Index (AQI).” *World Air Quality Index Project*, [aqicn.org/city/delhi/](https://aqicn.org/city/delhi/). Accessed 12 Jan. 2026.

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, 1993.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

Oxley, Rebecca, and Andrew Russell. “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World.” *Body & Society*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2020, pp. 3–29. SAGE Publications, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X20913103>.

Pérezts, Mar, et al. “Breathe and Let Breathe: Breathing as a Political Model of Organizing.” *Organization*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2025, pp. 136–153. SAGE Publications, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084241284055>.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. Oxford University Press, 1973.

## End Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://aqicn.org/city/delhi/>