

Will you yell back at history, you meant to do better? It wasn't just you?

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Russian wedding protest against pollution
Photo by A. Zhadanov Still Pictures.

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It's true that I experience Bangalore in part as a gas chamber (an enclosed space designed to kill by gas) and in part as a sewer. I'm not using these words metaphorically. I can't think of a more accurate pair of terms to describe this awful place, this wasteland of noxious fumes, dead things and vermin. How about you?

I live in the Western Ghats. I'm plagued by a question every time I visit Bangalore (or any other Indian city), especially when I meet friends who attend pranayama class, or jog ten rounds in a park or purchase organic vegetables: *how do you achieve health in a sewer?*

What's it like to do deep breathing with an exhaust pipe up your nose? For that's what Bangalore also is, a giant exhaust pipe. And it's up everybody's nose.

But seriously, do you as a resident of Bangalore consider yourself healthy? Does your definition of health include daily inhalations of 10,000 crores of suspended particulate matter (SPM) mostly from vehicular exhaust, industrial pollutants, construction material and waste, each particle taking 30 seconds to enter your bloodstream (The Hindu, November 2007)?

How exactly does air pollution destroy us? More importantly, why do we tolerate it? Is it that the long term consequences (lung cancer, chronic bronchitis, asthma, emphysema, pneumonia etc) are outweighed by the short term gains? Do we accept air pollution because it means more cars? We like cars. We want more cars. India Shining is full of shiny new cars. We'll ignore the asthma.

More than 300 new motorized vehicles are added to Bangalore's traffic in a day. That's 9000 a month, 108000 a year. Bumper to bumper (at an average length of 2 meters), that's 216 kms of vehicles, a distance from Bangalore to Srirangapatna and back. Implications? Insane congestion, insane sound pollution, more deaths by road accidents (118000 in 2008, Times of India) and a gazillion more particles up your nose.

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I continually ask city people, what could be more important to your life than the air you breathe? (Or the water you drink? Or the living environment that supports you? Or the land?). I am continually amazed by their responses. Yes, it's really awful, but what can we do? We don't have a choice.

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Does the term *toxic mimic* ring a bell? According to the writer, Derrick Jensen, in his book *Endgame*, a toxic mimic imitates the form of something else but not the content of that same thing. Rape, he says, is a toxic mimic of sex. Nationalism is a toxic mimic of community. War is a toxic mimic of play. Ever since I read this term I've been seeing toxic mimics everywhere.

I think this city to be a toxic mimic of the forest where I live, a mimic in which the incredible diversity in living beings is replaced by an incredible diversity in dead things, by a galaxy of dead things (recall the Samsung Smartphone ad?), destined to fulfil your every want and dream.

Do these dead things support your life, or your fantasy? Ever heard of the Happiness Machine? The BBC programme Century of the Self shows how the greatest con job of modernity is getting everyone to believe that buying objects (and more objects and more objects), brings us what we really need. Happiness.

I think rather that only *life* supports life. Only *life* (and more life and more life) supports your life, and your childrens' lives, and your childrens' childrens' lives.

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In the forest, living beings die, and their dead bodies decay to get pulled up by the earth to support life. There is no waste whatsoever. In the city, dead things (the functional and discarded products of industrial civilization) accumulate, they support nothing. They render the place (and the planet) uninhabitable for eons to come. Industrial civilization, the mass producer of dead things, can thus be said to be the genesis of ecological holocaust.

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Earlier this evening while walking around the Jayanagar Shopping Complex, I had this strange feeling that I was not seeing what I was seeing, a crowd of people out on a fun shopping spree, lured by monsoon sales and absurd price cuts, but something more ominous, and more intimate: my death, our death and the death of the planet.

Maybe I'm just a freaked out environmentalist staring into the maws of doom vaguely in the shape of a million shiny bits of tinsel, mounds of rexene bags, piles of cheap clothing, shelves heaving with plastic, metal, paper, cloth, glass, wood; and exhaust fumes thicker than mist. Maybe I'm just morbid about something as wonderful and harmless as window shopping.

Maybe you experience something else. Maybe you like the glittering silicon city that's replaced the old garden city. Maybe you're one of those happy people with unlimited purchasing power from being a citizen of the first world. You know (and everyone knows) the world is being run from Bangalore. Nobody is dying out *here*.

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But tell me, is a mobile phone alive or dead? Is a concrete house alive or dead? Is a tar road alive or dead? What about a plastic bucket, or a glass vase, or a gold necklace, or all the items in Ralph Lauren, Nike and Sony stores? Are these alive or dead?

What makes the city lethal in a wider sense, is that every one of these dead things is made from the bodies of living beings, a tree, a habitat, a forest, a village, a river elsewhere. The industrial production process ensures they can never be turned back into life. No amount of recycling or green technology will do that. The machines eat life and churn out anti-life.

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Cities are anti-life. You're being killed, slowly but surely. You are being gassed, poisoned and irradiated as you read this. Your children are being bombarded by killer particles on their way to school, at home, at play. Your life is being used to run machines that will produce more dead things, which then add more toxins to your life. Plastic is not harmless, computers neither, nor mobile phones nor cars. There are hundreds of hazardous substances entering your body from all these things. And if not your body, then surely into the body of the earth once you're done with them.

Are you surprised at the rates of cancer?

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There's more. Not only has the number of suspended particulate matter risen in Bangalore's air, so have a lot of hospitals. I did some googling for fun. Bangalore health clinics: 3,410,000 results; Bangalore hospitals: 10, 000,000; Bangalore yoga centres: 4,000,000; Bangalore gyms: 900,000; Bangalore meditation: 850,000; Bangalore pranayama: 403,000; Bangalore psychiatry: 944,000; Bangalore doctors: 12,000,000; Bangalore pharmacies: 2,930,000; Bangalore alternative therapies: 304,000.

I know some good doctors and good hospitals. I know that human life span has increased and that infant mortality has decreased.

But there's something weird about those numbers, there's something spookily industrial about them, even those that are alternative. Is it just a matter of population, more hospitals for more people? Could it be that more people are more sick so they require more intervention? Could it be that it's a good business strategy to pollute and poison your population first and then give them the elixir of life?

Is it coincidental that 40% of deaths worldwide are caused by water, air or soil pollution (Science Daily Aug 2007), and that the health industry has boomed like never before? Why is no one upset that air pollution can reduce your life span by 9 years? Why have we taken sides with car companies against our own lungs? Why do we settle for palliatives, when we know what's at stake? Why do we not tackle the source?

According to Wikipedia, Florence Nightingale had figured out that "external factors associated with the patient's surroundings affect life or biologic and physiologic processes, and his development. And that the environmental factors affecting health were pure or fresh air, pure water, sufficient food supplies, efficient drainage, cleanliness, light (especially direct sunlight). Any deficiency in one or more of these factors could lead to impaired functioning of life processes or diminished health status".

Where do we find these factors in Bangalore? Do we find them in the hospitals?

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I have some more calculations. There are more humans on this little back street in Jayanagar than there are tigers in the wild in India (1700). There are more humans in three back streets than there are elephants in the wild in south India (6000). There are more humans in Jayanagar 1st Block than there are bonnet macaques in south India (200,000). There are more humans than cattle in any area you choose. There are probably more humans than rats in Bangalore, or even cockroaches (a sign that pest control works).

Are any of these comparisons suggestive of a problem? With the earth in peril, as well as our immediate living environments (constituted by air, water, land and other beings), which of the above organisms should be controlled so we get a clean, nourishing environment back? Which of the above qualifies as a threat to the life of others, requiring drastic management such that they need to be controlled or eliminated?

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Besides it's not just numbers, it's what these numbers do. We all know by now about something called carbon footprint. The Indian poor are definitely not the smoggers of the planet, with the kind of carbon footprints they have. Middle class and rich Indians however, are another matter, with their first world aspirations for more smog spewing machines. Can their effects be controlled? Is there a technology we can put in place fast enough that will actually clean up before the awful end? I think not. Is there a solution for insatiable appetites? Can we have a planet and eat it too?

My list of vermin (organisms dangerous to others' health) is topped by rich urban Indians and rich (industrial) humans everywhere, vermin who are verminous to themselves as well as to every other life form. Something drastic needs to be done.

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Maybe numbers don't mean anything. We're so number crazed we fail to see direct relationships in the world, we don't attend with our senses. Let's leave alone the SPM or the google hits. Do you not find the Bangalore air intolerable? Do you not worry about what's in what you eat? Do you not feel upset about losing your loved ones to cancer?

What is your toxic limit? When will it be too much? What do your lungs have to say?

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In case you think air pollution and environmental toxification is a developing world issue, I read in Endgame that the air pollution in Los Angeles is so toxic that children born there inhale more carcinogenic pollutants in the first two weeks of their lives than the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) considers safe *for a lifetime*.

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Of course, there are many perspectives on this matter of cities. Some (most) say it's never been better, some (very few) say it should never have happened, and still others say, at any point in time there has always been a problem and we can fix it, there's time.

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I'm panicking that no matter the perspective, the real world, which includes our lungs, hearts and kidneys, and the lungs, hearts and kidneys of our children and our children's children, and the cells, tissues and organs of every life form, as well as the living earth, is being poisoned to death, because too many of us are in denial. Too many of us refuse the connection between land, water, air, plants, animals and climate.

I'm panicking that the worldwide amphibian die-off, the worldwide fish die-off, the worldwide bee die-off, the vulture die-off, and the big mammal die-off, will soon be followed by the worldwide human die-off.

But think again, why do all these have to die? Human beings and other beings don't have to die. It's just industrial civilization that does.

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I hold the kings of industry responsible for much of this, not the person zipping off to Electronic City with a conscience as clear as white sugar (for being part of India Shining), in her air conditioned Hyundai (that drives home a relationship), while her lungs go a deathly black.

I hold the kings of industrial civilization responsible, and their armies (which consume a huge percentage of the world's petroleum, and therefore contribute a huge percentage of the world's pollution) and their propagandists in media and education, for turning decent human beings into zombies who care less about the air they breathe than the size of their automobiles or bank balances. Zombies, who will soon be buying bottled air like they buy bottled water, believing that air comes from bottles, for a price.

In fact, I hold the kings of industrial civilization responsible for turning decent human beings into vermin.

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Why do these kings get away so easily? In the era of mega scams, there's one scam that's going unnoticed. The scamming of masses of people into believing that the earth is limitless, that the shelves will always be full, that a world free of pain comes when you get your galaxy of things at the flick of a switch.

Why did Warren Anderson get away as lightly as he did after the tragedy of Bhopal?

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It seems some people are fed up with kings and their impunity. Come September 30th, in London's Supreme Court, the world's first Ecocide trial will be staged in a mock court as a lead up to the 2012 Rio Summit, a campaign to make ecocide, the environmental equivalent of genocide, as the 5th International Crime against Peace, alongside Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, Crimes of Aggression and War Crimes.

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Imagine a smogfree Bangalore, green with beautiful trees, people walking around, vibrant community gatherings, no traffic jams, lots of animals and birds, time to sing and dance, everyone with a really clean, healthy and related life. It's still like this in some remote parts of the planet.

Though a friend of mine did say, when I told him I'd seen plastic bags far upstream in the forest: *civilization has arrived*.

As the clock ticks, with every minute, every hour, fewer places are spared.

If we don't stop the urban industrial mindset now, soon the whole of the Western Ghats will be like Bangalore.

I don't know about you, but that prospect gives me nightmares.

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“Breathe in, breathe out.... “

by Radhika Neelakantan

