

MILK IS A MULTITUDE

Savouring the complex flavour of milk from local cows who graze on trash and scraps, LILY KELTING considers what it means to taste the *terroir* of a city (Pune, India) shaped by urbanisation, pollution, and a colonial history.

Gauri is growing up fast. We met her when she was just two months old, her hair in swirls licked by her mother. She is a Holstein—a beauty—big wet eyes and wobbly knees and a strong, muscular neck. She lives in the apartment complex two doors down. She used to stay out in a parking space in front of the building, the rope around her neck chained to a sewer grate, but now she is in the back. The owners of the apartment building have created a cowshed from a small concrete storage area behind the building; the cowshed holds two lumbering buffalo, lights and fans for them, a water trough, trays filled with shredded millet stems for them to eat. Just outside the shed stands Gauri; she is barely visible from the street. The four-storey apartment building above shields her from the rain. From a car, all you can see is a perfectly respectable twelve-unit apartment building, with laundry drying on balconies and carefully watered plants.

We've been in Baner for a year. In Pune, these under-construction exurbs on the city edges are called by euphemisms like "Baner Annex" or "Baner Next." The road where Gauri and I live has no name—the landmark that the taxiwallas use to navigate is our own high-rise. We moved to the edge of the city because our twins needed more space: not in the American sense, but in the sense that two beds would not fit in any of our bedrooms. This new apartment complex has a playground: sold.

Now, I live up in the sky, up above the gulmohar trees of the housing societies clustered here at the foot of the *tekdi*, the green hill peeking between sky-high reinforced cement concrete towers topped by ever-glowing signs advertising the firms that built them. At night, the flash of welding from three construction sites looks like sparklers. When I first moved to Pune in 2017, I pitied those who lived in high-rise towers with cringey names like "Pebbles". And now this is our home. An alienated no-place, late-capitalist wasteland, cut across by an open sewer and nestled with groups of temporary construction-worker housing made of corrugated tin and tarps. But still: there's Gauri.

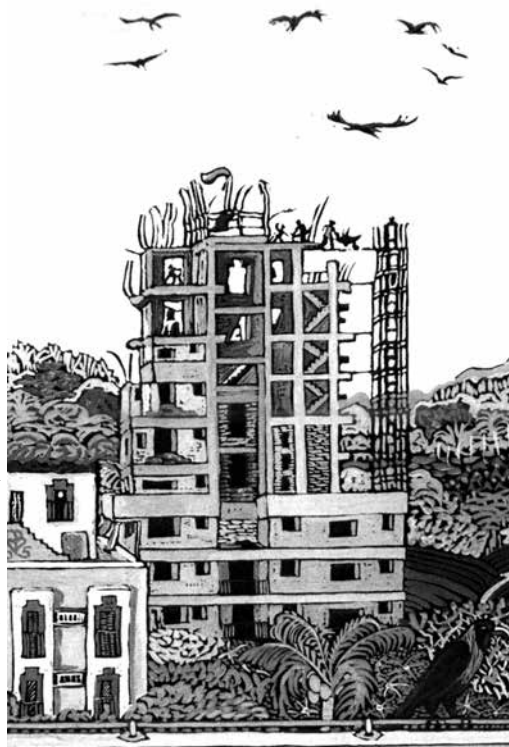
Before this, we lived in the city centre. The neighborhood is called Erandwane, which means castor forest, as it was when my grandfather-in-law bought a small plot of land and built a concrete house for his family. My father-in-law studied in a closet under the stairs. There are

photos of my husband as a toddler feeding the goats that nomadic herders would bring through. The road at that time was dirt. And then, thirty years after he left, my husband moved back with an American wife—me—and so, when we had kids, the bungalow had hosted four generations.

Every day for a year, at 5 p.m., I loaded my twin toddlers into the car and headed for a small slum community about five minutes from the old house, close to a local women's college campus called SNDT. We went to feed the cows. The cows of Erandwane's SNDT junction eat what they are given—leftover chapatis, blessed sweets given as prasad, the roots and stems left from sorting leafy vegetables. Across Pune, cows and goats graze over the city's asphalt. These urban animals eat weeds. They eat trash. Their milk is delicious.

I say "slum" so that you understand, but technically it's a *gaathan*. Gaathan means village in Marathi—like many Indian cities, Pune expanded around its village centers. These clusters of informal housing and informal markets are towered over by five-story middle-class developments and then towered over in turn by high-rises. The SNDT College junction stands right at the center of a much broader conversation about Indian urbanisation. The larger neighbourhood, Kothrud, was included in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the fastest urbanising neighbourhood in the world. This particular enclave—Pandurang Colony—is marked by a parade of diggers and dump trucks building new housing, a printing warehouse turned CrossFit studio turned performing arts venue, mobile food stalls serving cheap traditional breakfasts, and a travel agency that's always empty.

In this one lane, everything feels like a village: saris are draped to dry over handrails and motorcycles, a loose door is propped against a tree, chickens peck idly at grain, a dog scratches her ear, kids run around wearing collared shirts with no bottoms. Let's not mince words about the urban *gaathan*: the residents are poor. These neighbourhoods are traces of a smaller, preindustrialised city dwarfed by encroaching development. Many of the slum communities—especially the one I'm writing about—sprang up as workers' housing around urban cottage factories. Pandurang Colony still produces boilers and sheet metal in workshops behind the narrow lanes. The Pune metro has come up on the road's northern edge, and the corrugated tin buildings that stood there for years have been removed to make space for flat, white concrete slabs





of pavement leading to a gleaming three-story escalator. Once these stalls are gone, it's hard to remember what was there before. Images of "before" return as questions. A flower seller with a basket of heaped marigolds? The red concrete bus stop where I used to wait, each morning, for the bus? The area is changing, is "developing," every day.

The *gaathan* provides the service economy for both the neighbourhood's hidden small-scale industry and the middle-class and rich inhabitants of the fancier societies that flank the slums. There's a flour mill, a guy repairing rickshaws, a guy selling vegetables from a basket on the back of his bike. And there are goats. Chickens, yes. A tall cage of noisy brown doves. A scattering of birdseed. And cows.

Between two-storey tenements, one large indoor cowshed, full of buffalo, anchors the block. Around twenty of them stand in rows. An aluminium wall stands hip high to separate the shed from the road, above which are visible the buffalos' horns, their heads of almost human hair. The air is thick with smoke—a twisted newspaper burns as a bug repellent. Ineffective: the buffalo still swat idly at clouds of flies.

The second cowshed is open on three sides and in disrepair. Here is where the bulls and calves required to keep the operation running are housed: it's a reminder, as you enter the *gaathan*, that dairy is not just about the mother cow, Mother India. There is also the work of husbandry, the control of the cow's reproduction and lactation. Passing the bulls and calves reminds me of what I used to forget—that milk comes from cows whose calves bleat hungrily nearby.

The animals in this open shed are in bad shape. One of these bulls has an embolism below its eye and looks at us with a purulent leer. There is often a small fire in the corner of this cowshed, burning trash. Where else should the trash go?



This cowshed is the very edge of the edge of the neighbourhood. The trash must be burned somewhere; no one wants the burning trash in their backyard. The bulls don't seem to mind.

I download a joke app called "S**t! I Smoke" which takes my zip code and calculates how many cigarette equivalents of air pollutants I've breathed each day (nineteen). When people ask me whether I plan to stay in India, I reassure them, "as long as the climate in Pune is still livable, I'll live here." Unbeknownst to us when we signed the rental agreement, our apartment in Baner Next looks out over a "recycling center" which bears the putrid smell of decaying trash on the summer breeze. The edge of the city: what were we thinking? But again, where else?

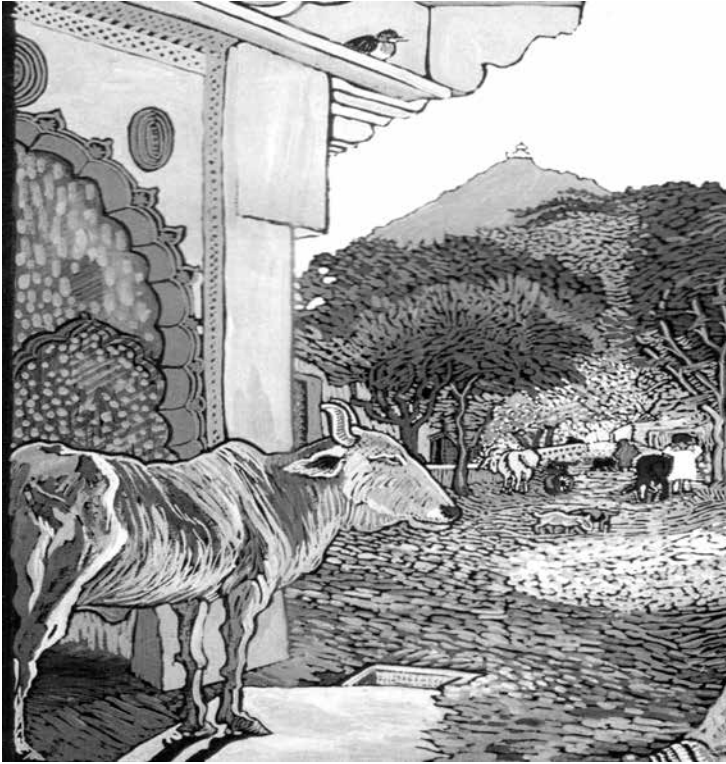
A little further up the road past SNTD are two more cows: Holsteins. The black and white spots are classic, storybook-like. Roped to a metal link hammered into the asphalt, the Holsteins are especially pathetic. They occupy the four feet between oncoming traffic and the barbed-wire fence that marks the edge of the property. Their manure forms a crusted paste on the road.

Before Gauri, before Baner, we mainly fed one big, white, humped Desi breed, one of three owned by a softspoken grandmother. This cow wore a ring beaded with the Indian tricolour around her neck. My toddlers tossed our sorted greens into her bucket, and laughed at the touch of her soft nose and rough tongue as she ate watermelon rinds from their hands. From this cow, they learned to nuzzle Gauri, who is just about their height. I think she recognizes them as children, like her. They grab the soft hair around barely protruding horns. And so now, whenever we are peeling carrots or sorting greens, they insist in their small, high voices:

"let's save these for Gauri, Mummy." It touches me immensely that they are always thinking of her.

In Hindu mythology, one of the seven oceans of the primordial world, Kshira Sagara, was made of milk. The gods and demons churned this milk to butter in a great battle; and from this came new life—including Surabhi, the primordial goddess mother-cow worshipped through her earthly avatars, cows. In the *Satapatha Brahmana*, milk is the sperm of Agni, the god of fire. Milk is elemental, powerful, flowing freely from the prehistorical past into our waiting thirsty mouths.

Because milk is theologically purifying, it is used to sanctify icons of gods and goddesses, to do *abhishek*. I once visited one of the twelve famous Jyotirlinga, a phallic embodiment of the god Shiva. So much milk was poured over the basalt phallus that coming to gaze on



the god required walking barefoot through a thin slick of milk, stained with red and yellow swirls of haldi kumkum, flotsam marigold petals, and stray tinsel.

Once every twelve years, at the Mahamastakabhishek at Shravanabelagola, a thousand litres of milk are poured over the towering sculpture of the Jain saint Bahubali. The milk streams over his perpetually open eyes, into the cavity of his chest, over his belly. A white lake pools at Bahubali's feet. During this time, the Hassan Milk Producers Union trucks in eight thousand litres of milk a day. Reading these statistics, I imagine the line of milk tankers waiting ready on the small access road. I think about people who are starving, for whom these litres of milk might mean salvation. I think about our old *dudhwalla*, the milkman who came each morning, huge panniers filled with milk bags on his motorcycle, and announced himself with a chesty "dudh!" I think about the rising cost of milk and wonder whether it will go higher. I don't know what to think about any of this.

A lot has been written about milk's theological and symbolic power in an Indian context. Very little has been written about how it tastes. Some people buy packaged milk from brands like Amul. These pan-Indian milks taste, predictably, like TetraPak. I keep one in my office in case of emergency (the emergency is that I have to teach and need a coffee). But most people—certainly most Pune-kars—are buying milk from small dairies like the one at the SNDT *gaathan*, urban and peri-urban dairies that function amid the life of the city, not outside of it. Back in the family house in Erandwane, the milk has come from the same small dairy's family for the past three generations. Their dairy, out in Pune's other exurbs, is bigger than the one at the SNDT junction: they have about fifty buffalo. In winter, the milk comes late because the milkman must give each buffalo a little massage to warm her before milking. This buffalo milk is arresting, a mouthful, rich and deep like cheese.

I am always eating my way into this place, always at the market squeezing plums. Part of this interest is professional—I teach food studies—but mostly it is just my desire to immerse myself in wherever I am. While *terroir*, the original French concept, is perhaps *outré*, its literal meaning, "taste of place," is a useful and generative idea. Use of the term is booming alongside more explicit concerns with local eating and "farm-to-fork" dining. But I am compelled to wonder (because I am, by both scholarly training and disposition, critical; and because I live next to an open sewer): What places does the concept of "taste of place" exclude? Is there room enough here for the milk I boil for my sons each morning, keeping the cream aside to make the day's yogurt? Can we talk about the taste of place when that place is an edge-place, a "developing" place, an ugly place, a no-place?

Even among experts—winemakers and cheesemakers—it can be difficult to understand what people are talking about when they say "taste of place." What about tradition? What about bacteria? In wine making, *terroir* comes down to soil composition, elevation, slope, sun, rainfall, that give the wine a certain taste. A French Cabernet Sauvignon will have a stronger, more acidic, more mineral edge—it will have more *terroir*—than one produced in California. Although, of course, the slate from the soil can't come up through the vines and into the grapes and into the glass: it's physically impossible. So what are we really tasting here?

Terroir is a kind of religion, a structure of feeling. No one wants to send the milk to a lab and find out its *terroir*. That is not the paradigm. Terroir is about a union between food and environment which is almost spiritual. In that sense, milk is the perfect vehicle for *terroir*, because the vehicle is not the inert grape, but the living, breathing, eating cow. We feed her and she feeds us. The scale of the Indian dairy is so small that there is no place to hide; the milk tastes like what the cows ate. Cows are routinely fed the stalks of sorghum and millet—agricultural byproducts from the millet flours that are staple grains in Maharashtra. Feeding the otherwise inedible stalks to cows reduces waste: essential when the profit margins for agricultural workers are already so tight. The economy of the urban dairy has no choice but to be circular. Sugarcane is the real cash crop of this region. Juiced sugarcane stalks seem to be nothing but tough fibers, but still they are chipped into small pieces and fed to cows. Of course the milk tastes sweet.

It is almost impossible to think of the milk produced by the slum cows of India as having *terroir*, which is why it is essential to do so—to expand our definition of "foods that taste of place" to milk that tastes of roadsides, of leftovers, of rotting marigolds, stems and packaged biscuits and the rinds of old fruit. I'm trying to focus not just on what is being lost, but on what is being created in these spaces. These are not no-places; they are *terroir*. We can taste these places: and through the milk of urban dairies, we do. The SNDT junction cows being edged out by gentrification could be seen as progress. It is harder to see the urban *gaathan* as a generative space, as a fertile space, a space that feeds.

Urban cows out to pasture in Pune eat not only leftovers, but the omnipresent Congress weed, *Euphorbia hirta*, the wild amaranth and Malabar spinach that green the city's vacant lots each monsoon. These cows are not eating grass—North America's idea of a healthy and happy cow's diet. They are eating everything. It's easy to forget how diverse, how robust, the ecology of India's cities is. The cows are eating dropped wild figs and tamarind and sour gooseberries blown off the trees. The city's abandoned corners—the highway verges and street sides that count as pasture here—are full of food.

In the USA, chef Dan Barber has made a career out of terroir, even plating up the “single-udder butter” of their “star milker,” Elsie, for special guests. But the commodification of “single-udder butter” proved unsustainable, even fatuous. Sweet Elsie could simply not give enough milk. But the gesture towards a more creative definition of dairy terroir persists; “The poor are stuck with the tyranny of the local,” chastises food historian Rachel Laudan. Poor people in India are drinking single-udder milk all the time. But no one cares, which is why I am telling you about it. If this is not terroir, we have no terroir at all.

I pour myself a steel tumbler of milk and try to describe what it tastes like. It's heavy and stratified — like the geological layers of the earth? Somehow softened, round, gently cooked. It's rich and kind of musky? How is this vegetarian? It tastes of buffalo. My mouth is full of fat. Its richness is all over the walls of my cheeks, my tongue. I have now drunk three glasses of milk. I can't describe it. I'll get another.

“The central fact of Hinduism is cow protection,” wrote Mahatma Gandhi in 1921 in *Young India*. This abstract assertion is now actively enforced through institutions like the right-wing, paramilitary Hindu nationalist organization, the RSS, and the current governing party of India, the BJP. The BJP's cow protection policies have empowered vigilante mobs to police “beef-ban” legislation; these mobs attack anyone suspected of “smuggling cattle” to sell as meat. The accused are always Muslim or Dalit: the groups who, due to ideas about pollution rooted in religious and caste bias, work most closely with animals' bodies. Some of these victims, like Rakbar Khan, murdered by cow protection vigilantes in 2018, are themselves dairy farmers. The threat of violence floats like an aura over each holy cow. Meanwhile, buffalo abattoirs are busier than ever.

While the milking cow is seen as a mother figure in India, the aging cow is waste. Cows are expensive to feed and maintain—if a cow is no longer able to give milk, and unable to be sold for meat or leather, what should be her fate? Unproductive cows are released by cash-strapped agriculturalists to roam the streets. It is hard to explain the magnitude of India's stray cow problem. We simply live within these contradictions. In the 2019/20 year, over thirty-eight thousand stray cows were killed by passing trains across India. In Baner, I pass two small herds of stray cattle each day on my commute home from work. Each day, one merry band moves slowly down a grassy highway verge to a recycling centre littered with dry trash. One brown cow mainly lies diagonally across

two lanes of traffic, blocking the entire highway underpass. Angry drivers honk their horns at her, but I wait. This road is, after all, her home.

Gauri and the SNDT cows occupy a middle category within this bovine landscape. They are not housed in a *gaoshala*, the cattle sanctuaries created by cow-protectionists. Neither are they strays—for the community, the SNDT cows are the single greatest asset besides their own labouring bodies. These cows are not exactly in the way, not exactly out of the way. They occupy space that would otherwise be occupied by litter. Many populous Indian megacities have pushed out the urban dairy—Delhi, for example, has restricted the urban zones in which small-scale dairies can operate, although many still do, illegally. For the time being at least, the SNDT Junction cows remain.

The fact that Hindus have a religious obligation to feed cows means a steady stream of visitors to the *gaathan*. Old ladies in Punjabi suits tell their rickshaw driver to wait while they hand a cow a neatly folded chapati. A businessman with shiny shoes steps out of a Mercedes and takes the cows' blessing, reverently touching the cow and then his own forehead. There's a story about an entrepreneurial farmer who stationed his cows outside a bustling temple—the worshippers are compelled by religious convention to feed his cows for him. A second hustler sells grass bundles. The farmer's cows are fed so full of grass that they turn their heads away.

“The cow is a poem of pity,” Gandhi continues in his essay. Most of the concerns with cows eating trash are really about cows eating plastic. Indian cows consume so much plastic it's unthinkable—there are reports of the removal of 18 kg of plastic waste from a cow's rumen, 27 kg of plastic, an impossible-sounding 52 kg. “It is normal to remove plastic from cows,” one doctor told an interviewer, “this is not new.” Cows pick at unsegregated roadside waste to get at leftover food inside plastic bags: the full-time pastime of the stray cows that drift around the recycling center on the Mumbai-Pune highway. One study explored whether cows are singularly attracted to the smell of decomposing plastic compounds, because they consume so much of it. I suspect, although this is wholly unscientific, that they are just hungry.

When we feed the SNDT junction cows, their owners ask us each time—“Just greens, right? Just food, right? Not the



newspaper, please. No twine. No twist ties.” To call a vet could bring financial ruin. The cows do not leave their chains for a very good reason: what if they eat a plastic bag? Instead the cows consume so much other waste—sugarcane stalks, agricultural byproducts, old chapatis, and flowers. The contents of their rumens and the taste of their milk is a direct index of the human life teeming around them. If they eat plastic, the milk is toxic. If they eat the juiced-up husks of sugarcane stems, the milk carries an almost inappropriate sweetness. If they eat old chapatis and scraped-up dal bhat the taste is—I can’t describe it. Our cabbage leaves and green onion and coriander roots are fed to the heifers, who are not yet lactating. Those tastes will not appear in the milk.

How can I make sense of this milk made in slums, and of these animals living, sleeping, lactating on the side of the road where, in a different city, the pavement would be? Pollution is colonialism, writes Max Liboiron. It is a disruption to “land-body relations.” What does this mean in an Indian context, where the whole neighbourhood is a dumping ground? This omnipresence of trash on roadsides, in cows’ rumens, describes what it means to live in the Global South. Living with trash is the condition of being postcolonial. None of this is abstract. This is about the taste of milk. I want to talk about this milk, which you have never tasted, and which arrives in a plastic bag I can’t recycle. I want to talk about this milk, which is so local that it tastes of all that we leave behind.

“The cities of the future,” writes Mike Davis, “are largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the 21st. century urban world squats in squalor.” There is no romanticising “the outside” in the slum, where even homes are open to the wind. The urban *gaathan*, not the rural *gaon*, the village, is our future. When all these buildings are finished, parceled into units, and sold; when Baner Next is full and is called simply “Baner”; when even the four-story building with the cowshed is razed to become another high-rise—there will be another Baner Next, and another after that.

And yet! There will be cows. There will be milk. The milk will taste like us, like home.

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Pictures by Gill Barron, from “ACHCHHA! Paintings of India”. This article first appeared in **Emergence Magazine**: read the whole essay at: <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/holy-terroir/>



Dudh News

India is the world’s top milk producer, output having reached 230.58 million tonnes during 2022-23, an increase in production from 187.30 million tonnes in 2018-19, and now registering a 58 percent increase during the years between 2014-15 and 2022-23. This is a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of six percent. The FAO Dairy Market Review (2023) estimates production will increase to reach 236.35 million tonnes in 2023-24, registering a growth of 2.5 percent over the last year, beating the world average growth rate of 1.3 percent in 2023.

In India, dairy is the single largest agricultural commodity, contributing five percent to the national economy and directly employing more than eight crore (eighty million) farmers. It is also the world’s largest livestock owner, with a total livestock population of 536.76 million, made up of 303.76 million bovines, and 74.26 million goats.

The cooperative sector is booming, and includes 22 Milk Federations/Apex Bodies, 240 district cooperative milk unions, 28 marketing dairies, and 24 Milk Producer Organizations. These organizations encompass approximately 230,000 villages and include 18 million dairy farmers as members. Women are substantially involved, with 35 percent of women participating in dairy cooperatives. There are 48,000 women’s dairy cooperative societies operational at the village level nationwide.

Currently, low productivity per animal hinders development of the dairy sector. Despite being the world’s largest milk producer, India’s productivity per animal is very low, at 987 kg per lactation, compared with the global average of 2,038 kg per lactation.

Despite this, the per capita availability of milk in India stands at 459 grams per day for 2022-23, significantly higher than the global average of 322 grams per day as reported in Food Outlook June 2023. This abundance not only supports the nutritional needs of India’s vast population but also underscores the efficiency and productivity of the Indian dairy industry, an industry still run almost entirely by people, not corporations.

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