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Stuti Panwar is a 2nd year student currently pursuing higher studies in design from Delhi Technological University (DTU). Her work focuses on imaginative visual disciplines such as Concept Art, Animation and Game Design, viewing them as powerful tools for expression, representation and connection. Her process is fueled by an enthusiasm for research and narrative based storytelling which forms the foundation of her design decisions.

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Decoding A Self Introduction

Saisha Arora

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Abstract

This article explores how identity is communicated through both verbal and non-verbal methods, framed through the conceptual lens of a self-introduction. "How does one introduce oneself?" Beyond spoken language, identity is performed through gestures, routines, spatial occupation, and everyday interactions. Using the *"chai tapri"* (Tea Stall) as a microcosm, this study examines how such informal establishments emerge from the specific social, spatial, and cultural conditions of a place, becoming direct reflections of their surroundings. Rather than viewing street vendors merely as informal economic agents, this research positions them as active placeholders, cultural mediators, and custodians of living urban traditions.

Through close observation of a single chai tapri (its rhythms, sensory environment, customer interactions, and spatial negotiations) the study develops an understanding of how identity is constructed through repetition, familiarity, and embodied practice. This micro-level inquiry is then expanded to larger food markets and, ultimately, to the urban fabric of Shahjahanabad as a whole, revealing how small, localized exchanges contribute to broader networks of social life.

By tracing smells, gestures, spatial arrangements, and modes of gathering, this research demonstrates how urban heritage is sustained through everyday practices that often remain overlooked

and undocumented. These informal systems are rooted in care, performance, adaptability, and collective memory. To safeguard the cultural vitality of historic cities, attention must extend beyond architecture and planning frameworks to the lived practices and people who animate these spaces each day.

Keywords

- *Street Vendors*
- *Shahjahanabad*
- *Social Performance*
- *Street Ecology*
- *Spatial Negotiation*
- *Performative Space*
- *Oral Histories*
- *Cultural Memory*
- *Taste and Identity*

Observational Parameters

- Seating that welcomes – spatial boundary
- *"Chai ki Tapri"*– placeholder for time and mood
- Street food culture – fluidity of senses
- Shahjahanabad - controls memory

Introduction: The Agony of Piecing History Together

History isn't easy to access. These days history is heavily diluted and influenced so to understand history at the core one must partake in extra actions which may not be accessible by many people.

To understand Shahjahanabad, one must search for fragments:	
Artists	the stories told by craftsmen and artisans hold significant status
Food	Food is such a vast and diverse instrument which can help us unfold history in so many more ways than imaginable.
Journalism	street interviews and journalism from reporters helps lessen the bridging gap between the people and the culture in an accessible manner.
Cultural institutions	government initiatives like managing cultural institutions gives us a look inside a raw expression of what the art and heritage at the previous time was like and helps us understand better.
Places	different places narrate unique stories that can be very educational for the general masses.

Table 1. Journal Entry on data collection points.

It's a challenging journey. But the journey has to be undertaken before the final sketch takes its shape.

Five Month Research Journey

Month 1: Immersion & Primary Observation

CLASS OBJECTIVE: To represent research findings through drawing, observation, and contextual study, culminating in a presentation before a panel of three evaluators.	
Class Assignment with Partha Pratim Das for Interaction Design.	
Sites Visited:	a. Gurudwara b. Dariba Kalan c. Chandni Chowk, d. NaiSarak e. Red Fort.
Focus Areas:	a. On-site sketching as a method of documentation b. Informal conversations with locals c. Understanding and sketching spatial experiences d. Movement, people and social interactions
OUTCOME:	This phase emphasized slowing down and learning to see—recording architectural details, public behaviour, and sensory cues through sketching rather than just photography.

Table 2. Journal Entry on Immersion and Primary Observation.

Observational and Documentation Skills were used while conducting the Immersion as shown in the above table.

Month 2-3: Structured Sketching Rounds

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE: To represent research findings through drawing, observation, and contextual study, culminating in a presentation before a panel of three evaluators.	

Study Parameters:	a. Observing public mood and behavioural patterns
	b. Mapping street structures and circulation
	c. Analysing architectural language
	d. Studying typographic styles
	   • Signboards
	   • hand-painted lettering
	   • printed signage
	e. Comparative study with Chandni Chowk

Focus Areas:	a. On-site sketching as a method of documentation b. Informal conversations with locals c. Spatial experience through drawing d. Movement, crowd density, and social interactions
INSIGHT: This phase focused on identifying differences between neighbouring markets—how layout, commerce type, and crowd psychology shift across spaces.	

Table 3. Journal Entry for month 2 - 3.

Institutional & Cultural Context was observed in detail as shown in the following table.

Institutional & Cultural Context	
Craft Museum	**a. Tracing remnants of tangible and intangible heritage** **b. Identifying disappearing crafts and practices** **c. Understanding continuity and rupture in cultural production**
NGMA: National Gallery of Modern Art	**a. Studying how national identity was constructed** **b. Understanding art as a response to political turmoil** **c. Examining how art functioned as a tool for rebuilding confidence and collective identity**
OUTCOME:	**This phase expanded the research from street-level observation to national and historical frameworks.**

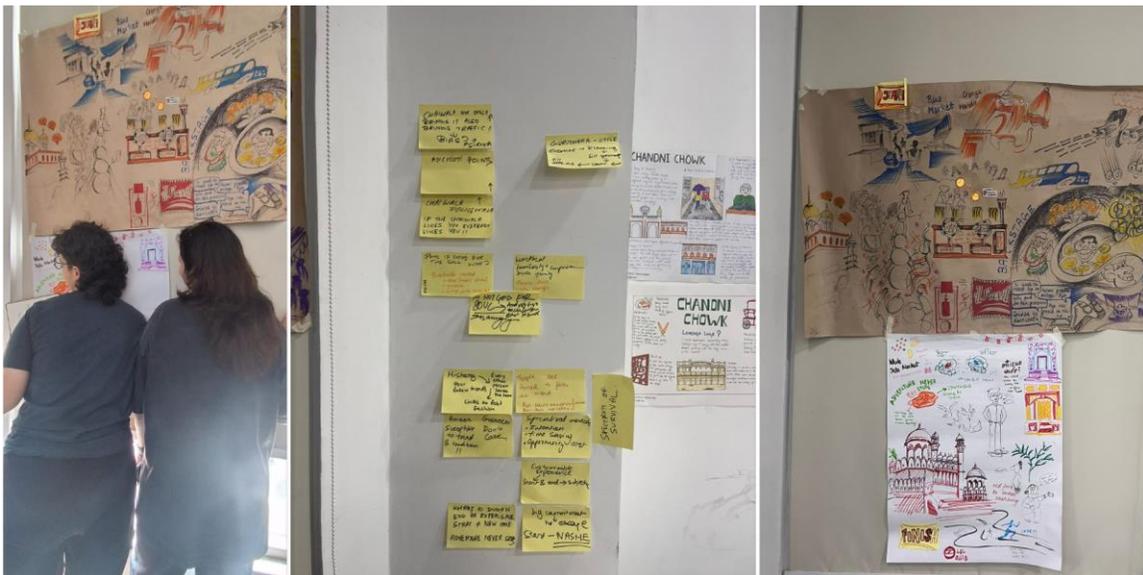*Table 4. Journal Entry on Institutional and Cultural Context.*

Figure 1: Classroom Presentation

Presentation was done and field study insights were discussed in the class.

Month 4: Historical & Intellectual Engagement

PRIMARY LOCATION: Chauri Bazar.	
Conversation:	**Conversation with 5th Gen Purani Delhi wale.** **a. Historical context of Shahjahanabad** **b. Understanding the "syncretic life" of the old city** **c. Identifying current urban challenges** **d. Tracing the idea of "lost confidence" in built and social environments**
Jama Masjid Study:	**Spatial dominance and symbolic power** **Relationship between religious structures and surrounding markets**
Outcome:	**This month deepened theoretical grounding and layered historical understanding over earlier observations.**

Table 5. Journal Entry for Month 4.

Month 5: Food Systems & Urban Culture

PRIMARY LOCATION: Chandni Chowk and Karol Bagh.	
Food Research with TaurasStalnionis (Design Researcher)	
Key Questions:	**Can the knowledge of street food vendors be harnessed during food crises?** **Does experiential food culture contribute to a fuller life?** **How might the rise of online food platforms impact local food ecosystems?**

Comparative Urban Study:	
Chandni Chowk	Layered history, dense inconsistencies in environment
Karol Bagh	Commercialized, grid-based, structured planning
OUTCOME:	This phase examined food as both sustenance and cultural memory, linking street knowledge to larger systemic questions.

Table 6. Journal Entry for Month 5.

Figure 2: Live sketching people around the tapri and food market.

Section 1- Seating That Welcomes

In a market where vegetables are confidently displayed under bright lights, her hesitation feels sharper. The produce belongs. The sellers belong. The regular customers belong. She, meanwhile, negotiates her presence—measuring it in coins, in posture, in the acceptable duration of standing still.

An abstract Sunday evening.

"The brightly lit galliyan announces that it is mandi night.

matter kechilke,

Oranges with their stems still attached,

Mushrooms sealed in tiny plastic packets, or exactly three lemons,

The walk itself is irresistible."

Table 7: Diary Entry on the environment.

She wants to sit down and sketch for a while. Finding a chair is not the problem. There are plastic stools, wooden crates, upturned buckets. The real question is: which chair welcomes her? Is it reserved for the shopkeeper? For his friends? Is it available only because he has stepped away briefly? Or because refusing a stranger would seem impolite?

Does she earn the right to sit if she buys something? And if so, what qualifies? Is a two-rupee toffee sufficient, or does legitimacy require a more substantial purchase—rice for a family of four? She catches herself in that assumption; she lives alone. But if she did arrive with a hypothetical family, would her child be allowed to sit? Her wife? Or is seating a privilege rationed quietly through familiarity and transaction?

Figure 3: Diary Excerpt and Sketch.

She decides she can eat her toffee standing. Standing is safer. Standing demands less negotiation. But standing does not allow the stillness required to sketch. To linger too long without purpose risks attracting attention. To observe too closely risks unsettling someone.

Approaching a Tapri

"We remember places through anchor points. Usually, it's not buildings we recall first, but people and routines. In many Delhi neighbourhoods, the chaiwala becomes that anchor. His stall doesn't just sit in the market; it helps define it. When entering a new environment, everyone looks for a small act of familiarity. A dog pees and marks territory. A Delhiwala drinks chai."

Table 8: Diary Entry on deciding a Tea Stall

Section 2- Chaiwala

After long walks, when other shops blur into one another, a tapri almost always appears. To understand a market in Delhi, you don't need to read its master plan—you stand beside its chaiwala. The pace of the place becomes clear there. How quickly is the chai served? Are customers lingering or rushing? Is it poured into a kullad or a paper cup? These small observations reveal how the market functions.

Chai Tapri

"You are not fully part of an Indian street until you have stopped at its tapri. It is not just a stall; it is an entry point. Before you learn the shortcuts or shop names, you recognize the kettle's whistle. You scan the QR code. You order the same chai. The chaiwala greets you in the same way—morning, afternoon, or late at night."

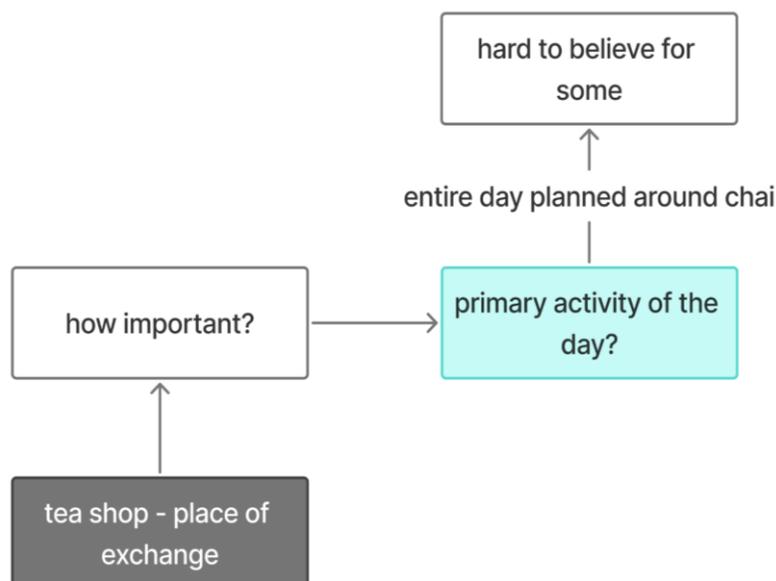*Table 9: Diary Entry on Chai Tapri*

Figure 4: Routines take shape around daily trips to the tapri for a cup of chai.

Same order. Same exchange. Through repetition, familiarity forms. And gradually, the street becomes less unfamiliar.

The tapri is set up every day, the same way, at the same time. And the same people come to get their 5th cup with the same punctuality. But somewhere is this loop of familiarity comes invisibility. People notice the tea before the person making it. He allows every person coming in to be in their own world for that little while. He is overlooked precisely because he is constant. And yet, if the tapri disappears tomorrow the routines of so many people will remain affected.

Chai Walla

"Aside from the overall process, even the individual movements are stylish. Maintaining the heat in the pan. Flicking in the "cheeni" and "chai patti" in the pan. Smashing the "elaichi" open. The dramatic pour to give you the frothiest cup possible.

Repetition slowly builds identity. Every cup of chai leaves behind something. Small spills are part of the ritual. Circular stains mark the trays from which it is served. Drops settle onto benches as people wait for the tea to cool. On busy days, slight nudges and passing elbows cause tea to slosh over the rim, leaving behind uneven traces on counters and pavement."

Table 10: Diary Entry on Tea Seller

His identity is not drawn from what his name is or what logo he has, if his stall is big and beautiful with led lights but from his technique that he has perfected over years of work and practice. The smoothness in his process shows the efficiency in his movement. But efficiency never disregards style. If one chaiwala is meticulous with

the amount of milk "cheenichaipati" he cuts, measuring everything and maintaining written records of how many cups he has sold in a day. Another might produce a glorious cup by ripping open a milk packet right in the pan. Measured or estimated more often than not the taste remains constant.

On closer observations, these patterns begin to reveal subtle insights. They show where people tend to stand, linger, and return to. Chai is rarely consumed alone. It is almost always followed by the familiar question: *"Saathmeinkuchlenge?"* A biscuit, a sutta, a pouch of gutka, a small candy—each addition leaves its own trail. Crumbs gather in corners. Ash falls in specific clusters. Empty wrappers accumulate near certain spots. From these side dishes, groupings begin to emerge. Those holding cigarettes stand together. Biscuit-dippers cluster near the counter. Gutka chewers drift toward the edge. There are exceptions, but more often than not, people with similar accompaniments unconsciously pair themselves. The consumers arrange themselves. The tapri becomes a quiet map of social alignment—drawn not in ink, but in stains, crumbs, ash, and proximity.

This Casual clutter starts to become a problem when it affects hygiene, movement, and perception. Spilled tea makes surfaces sticky and slippery. Crumbs attract insects. Used cups, wrappers, and ash accumulate faster than they are cleared. What begins as incidental quickly becomes unsanitary. In crowded markets, limited space amplifies the issue. Narrow pavements get blocked. Customers spill onto the road. Waste mixes with existing street garbage. The stall, already operating informally in many cases, becomes more visible to authorities when disorder increases. There

is also a reputational impact. Standards shift. The stall's social credibility weakens. At this point, maintenance becomes essential.

Ultimately, a tapri does not construct an identity independent of its surroundings—it inherits and performs the identity of its location every single day. Its pricing reflects the spending capacity of the area. Its hygiene standards reflect local expectations. Its speed mirrors the urgency of the street. Its conversations echo the politics, professions, and pressures of the neighbourhood. Even the strength of the chai adapts to climate, class, and customer base.

To brand a tapri, then, is not to design it differently but to understand where it stands. The place is the brand. The locality writes the menu, sets the tone, defines the crowd, and determines the lifespan of the stall. The chaiwala responds, adjusts, and survives within that framework.

How does she interact with her chaiwala?

"Bhaiya, do cup lagadena." "Bhaiya, ek biscuit."

This personalized banter is enjoyed by both sides, the chaiwala and the customer. The interaction goes beyond the taste of tea; it is the experience itself that people seek. Gradually the stall becomes more than a place to grab chai but rather it becomes their spot, a corner of the street that feels personal, owned, and comforting. This trust and familiarity give the chaiwala a unique influence over the street around him.

Table 11: Diary Entry on Interaction

Figure 5: Decoding A Self Introduction

In markets like Chandni Chowk and Chawri Bazar, where entire streets are dedicated to a single type of product, crossing from one street to another can be both time-consuming and physically taxing. Amid this chaos, the tapri offers a brief but vital respite.

Figure 6: Chai tapris operate as spatial anchor points within a market ecosystem.

One might assume that specialized markets selling only shoes, clothes, tires, or other goods operate independently. But that is far from the reality. In Karol Bagh, for example, streets lined with shoe shops are also hubs for "kabadiwale", who collect discarded shoe boxes to be resold to factories. Behind this intricate web of trade and recycling, the chaiwala plays a quiet but essential role. And the fuel for this operation again provides our chaiwala who this time is on his feet with a kettle running from one shop to another.
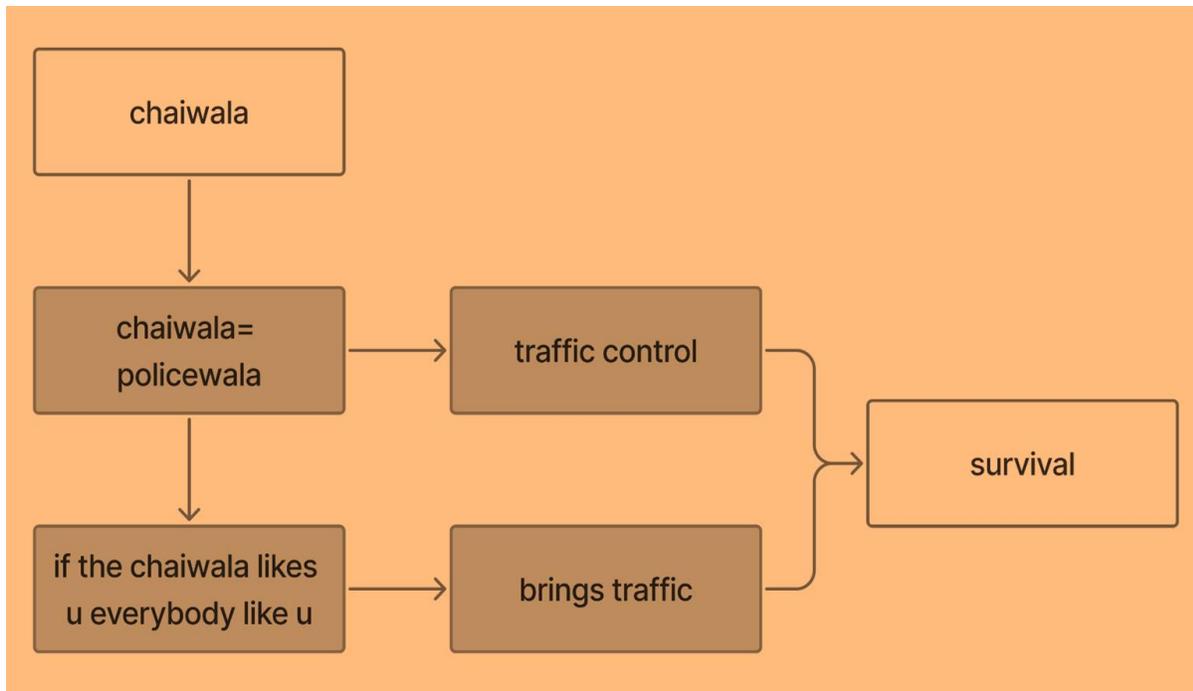
Figure 7:A chaiwala subtly regulates foot traffic by redirecting the flow of people around his stall, and throughout the market

If the chaiwala likes you, everybody likes you. He's the one controlling the traffic. When traffic pours and people are in search of a particular shop, product or person, a roadside *"tapriwala"* is faced with all these questions. He redirects foot traffic, offers quick advice, and helps people navigate streets.

But this control is not neutral. What happens if he has a friend selling something "better"? His guidance may shift, intentionally or unconsciously. He might undertake active initiatives to maintain how many people and for how long people stay around his stall. One such chaiwala was observed putting *"chaipatti"* left in pan after making chai on bollards which line the streets to stop construction workers who sit and smoke for longer periods from flocking that area.

He may even take active measures to manage both the number of people around his stall and the duration of their stay. One chaiwala,

for example, was observed placing leftover "*chaipatti"* from brewed tea onto the bollards lining the street. This stopped construction workers from sitting and smoking there. Smell is a very active agent in sending out the message in the environment attracting passer-by to stop for a cup.

Smell is a powerful agent in communicating with the environment, drawing passer-by to pause for a cup of chai. *"Chaiwalas"* actively harness this sensory cue, using the steam and aroma from their kettles and sometimes strategically positioning exhausts to spread the fragrance further and attract customers.

Gossip rarely escapes the ears of the chaiwala—sometimes it seems as if it is almost calling out for his attention. But what is the true nature of this gossip? Truth is often secondary; the purpose is not accuracy but reflection, connection, and participation. Through the act of sharing, people assert a sense of belonging and involvement in the social environment.

Gossip is also a subtle regulator of social hierarchy. Who speaks, who listens, and whose words carry weight all shape perceptions of status and influence. Over time, patterns of conversation can shift these hierarchies, elevate some voices, and diminish others, reflecting the dynamic and fluid nature of relationships within the community.

These conversations are never free from personal biases and pre-existing beliefs. They are as much about projection as they are about observation—a space to voice opinions, frustrations, or judgments in a socially acceptable setting. Yet, despite—or perhaps because of—these biases, gossip reveals a great deal: individual personalities, recurring themes, and the values and quirks of local culture.
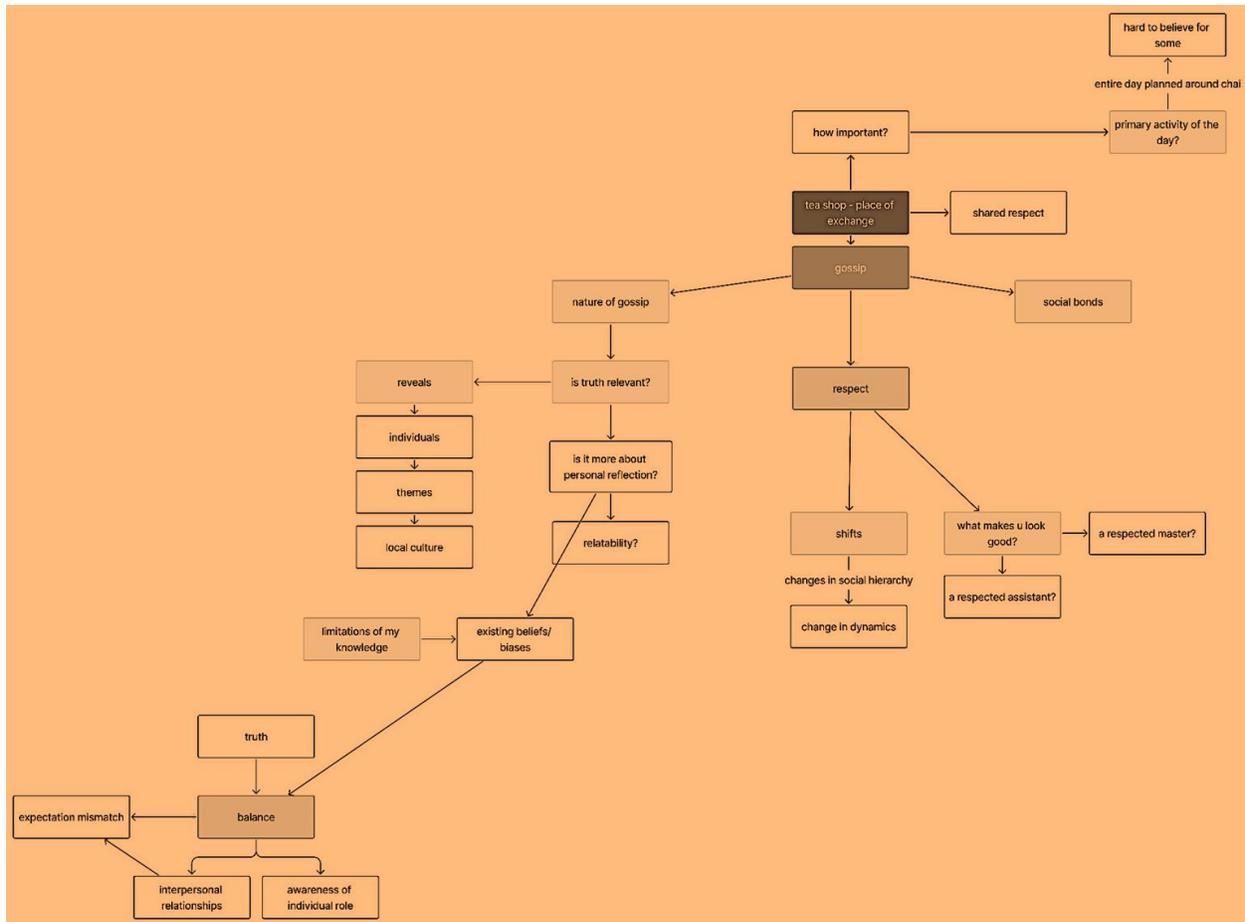
Figure 8: Primary activity at a chai Tapri- Gossip.

Amid all these discussions and gossip, the chaiwala ensures that arguments never become hotter than the chai. He remains vigilant, quietly managing tensions, making sure that no one is provoked or harmed while the conversations unfold.

Section 3- Street Food Vendor

Perception of The Street Vendor

What is a vendor looking for when searching for a spot to place his stall? He looks for already existing shops and how it may affect his future businesses, a nearby accessible water source - a necessity, pillars and supporting structures to build up his stall, ever so

standing bollards. All these tiny seemingly insignificant frugal decisions are what helps a vendor to build his stall in a specific location.
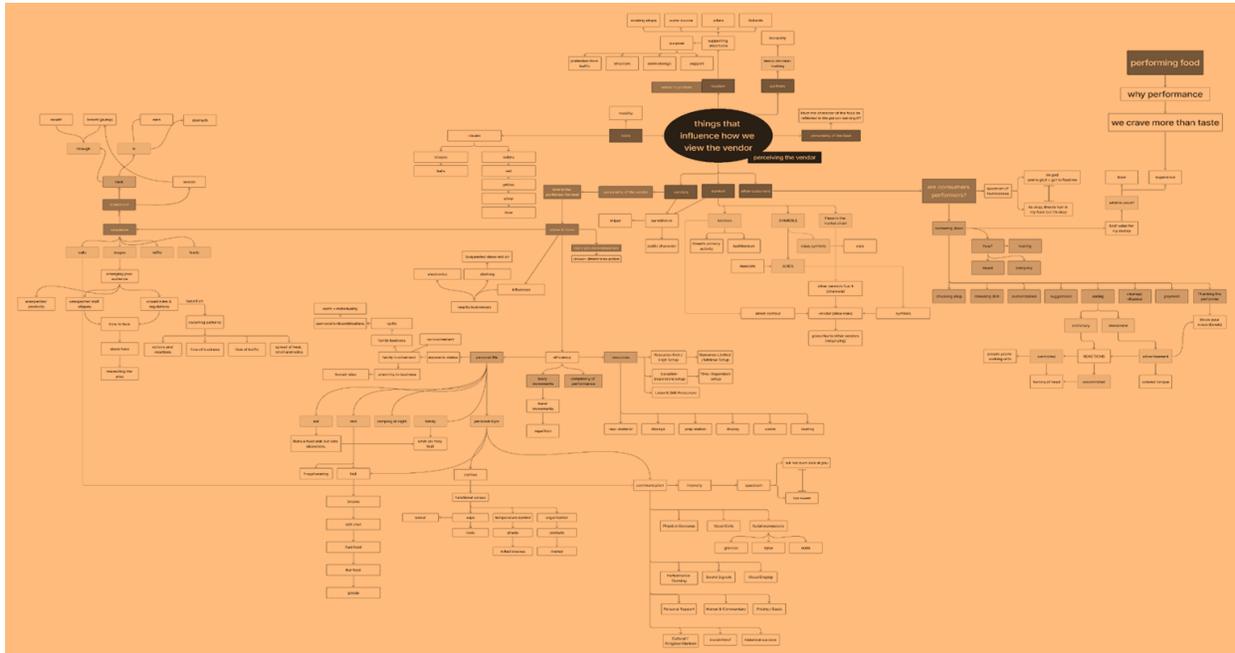

Figure 8: Caption Performing food: Things that Influence how we view street food vendor.

A stall rarely stands alone. It leans, attaches, nests and adapts. Pillars serve as back walls, bollards become leg rests and shop shutters act as windbreakers. These decisions pose a much greater purpose than just the ease and comfort of the vendor and the demanding customer. They play a bigger role such as how the stall will be protected from the traffic and other vexing structures in the long run. Other secondary factors might include but not be limited to extra storage or support.

If we were to consider the stall as an identity now, there can be many distinctions for a stall. A stall can be more structured and grounded or stable, or it can be mobile and ever so adapting to

different circumstances. Those are all the subconscious decisions that a vendor has to think about before planning to open a stall.

The street gives the vendor a framework. In return, the vendor brings the streets to life. This supporting structure does more than protect from traffic or weather; it defines who can approach, where people can pause and how long conversations last. Storage crates serve as stools, while a parked scooter doubles as a table. The stalls' architecture was never planned. It was discovered. And the thrill is in knowing that every street is different from the previous one.

Context: Reading the street's primary activity
- every street tells the stall what it can become - a market street demands speed and volume. - a residential lane allows for intimacy - a transit edge emphasizes portability and price.
Insight: Symbols gather around vendors. Cars indicate class. Gods are mascots signal protection. Nearby shops show hierarchy with the local economy. The stalls' role in the market chain- suppliers who act as the foundational B2B (business-to-business) link in the supply chain and social hub by fostering community interaction, cultural exchange, and economic inclusivity in public spaces. These factors become clear through who stops, who stays, and who simply pass.

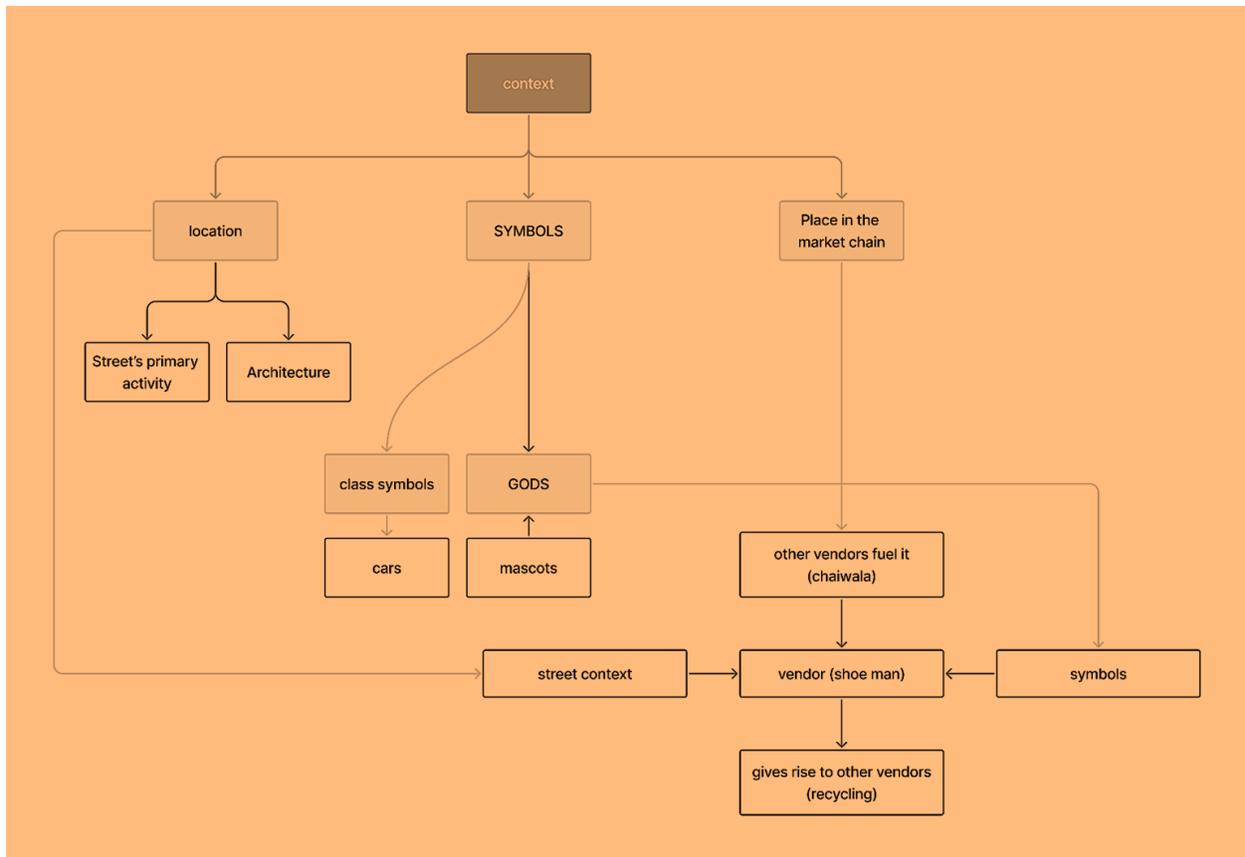*Table 12: Diary Entry on Street Activity.*

Figure 9:The spatial and social context of the street.

Personality of the food

Some questions that come while understanding he personality of food.

Observation Parameters:
A. Does the food's character shape the person or does the person shape the food?
B. Do we start to expect that the personality of the food is reflected in the person selling it?
Pointers:
A. sharp, quick snacks often come from sharp, quick hands.
B.slow brewed chai is accompanied by slower speech, longer glances and extended pauses.

Table 13: Diary Entry on Personality of Food.

Public Character and Surveillance

The constant and never-ending whirlwind of actions may seem overwhelming to us viewers but to the vendor it is a performance in which he much acts as a guardian. Constantly keeping an eye on who arrives, who leaves, and who lingers for way too long.
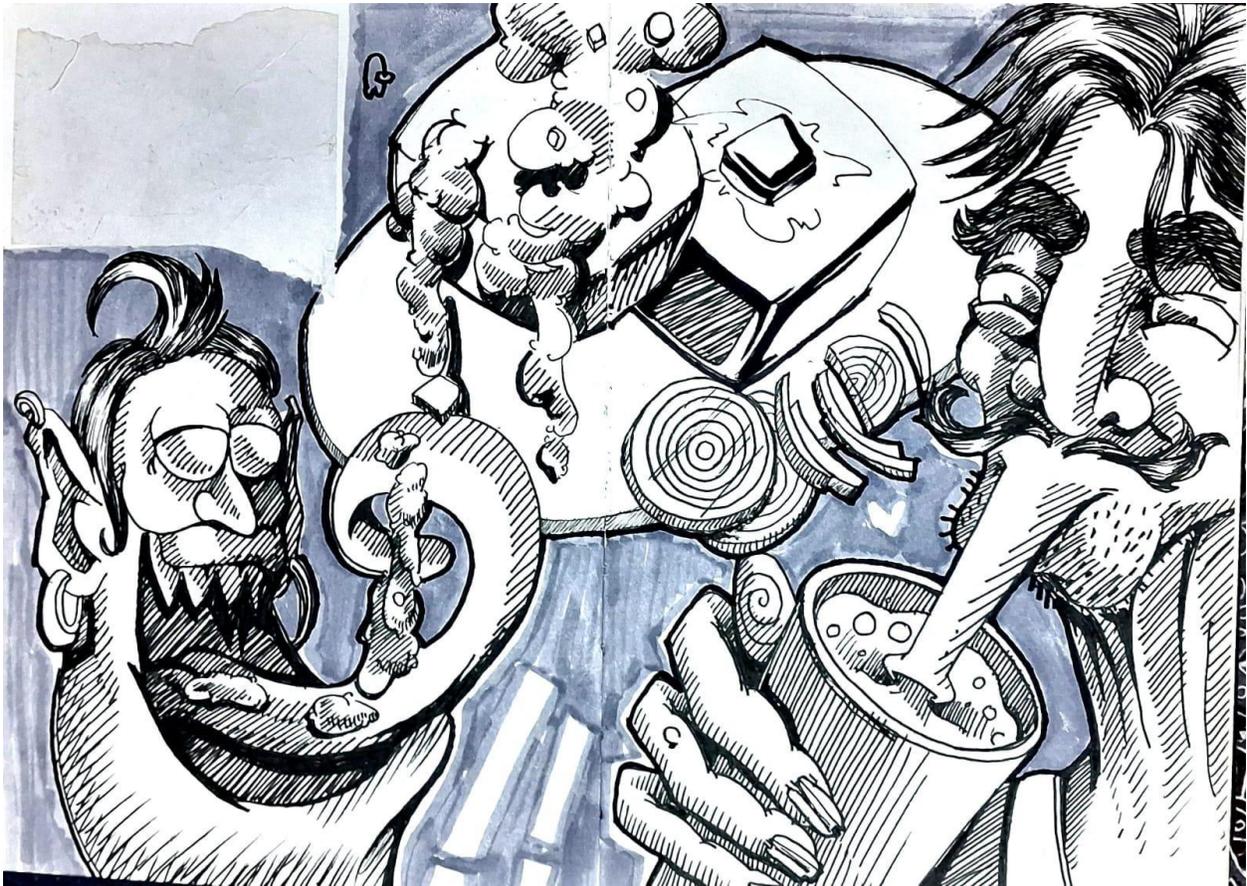

Figure 10: Abstract observational sketches.

Every vendor has a distinct characteristic, those attributes can be decoded from his act. The vendor is not trained. His past spills out (pun intended) into his skill and present - migration stories, family relations, learned habits, inherited gestures. These can be communicated through his personal style, how he dresses and presents himself, humour, pricing tactics, and speech rhythms.

Communication Layers	
physical communication	hand flicks, ladle taps, head nods
vocal communication	calls, chants, commentary
facial communication	glances that invite, eye contact in understanding, reassuring nods, smiles that engage.

Table 14: Communication Layers.

Do we expect the personality of certain food and its nature to be present in the vendor itself either subconsciously or willingly?
Does a person selling predominantly spicy food have a sharp personality or is the vendor selling sodas can have a more laid-back way in life?
And are those attributes relayed in his day to day activities?

Table 15: Diary Entry on Personality of Food.

For the vendor the act of cooking can be interpreted as a choreography. The act of cooking can convey many things not only by the final food but by the entire process- sound signals (the sizzle as the oil touches the hot pan, the boiling of noodle etc), visual displays, commentary.

A vendor may sell food for a living, but he does not eat at his own stall. To sell is his occupation; to eat is personal. Often, he steps away from the monotony of his workspace to reclaim a sense of individuality not defined by customers, transactions, or routine. He eats food prepared and packed from home, finding comfort in its familiarity. In that meal lies a brief separation between profession and person.

The stall and the settlement exist in quiet partnership. One sustains livelihood; the other sustains life.

Efficiency as an Art form

The vendor constantly decides where to be precise and where to be flexible. In Chandni Chowk, movements are intentional; they are measured, ritualistic, and full of repetition.

3 Parameters for Efficiency:	
Body Movement:	muscle memory built through repetition
Resources:	from high-setup stalls to minimal, time-dependent, or location-bound setups
Complexity:	some foods need finesse, while others reward volume

Table 16: Diary Entry on Parameters for Efficiency Street Activity.

Constraints guide the performance. The act is never fully predetermined—it adjusts based on crowd size, weather, police presence, and time of day. Calls draw attention. Refills extend presence. Feeding creates zones—standing circles, waiting lines, lingering clusters.
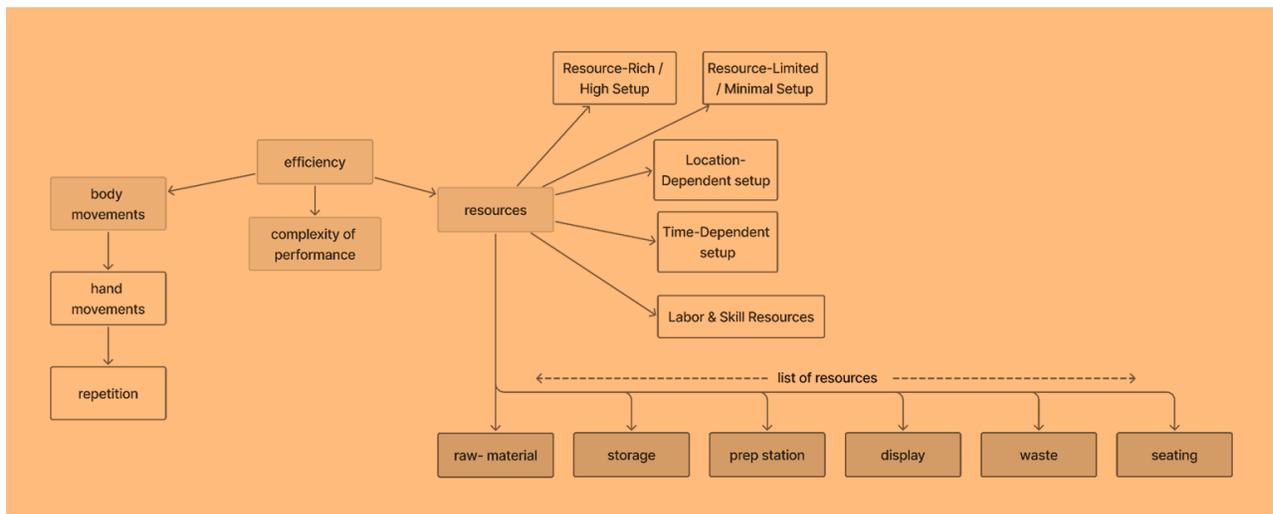

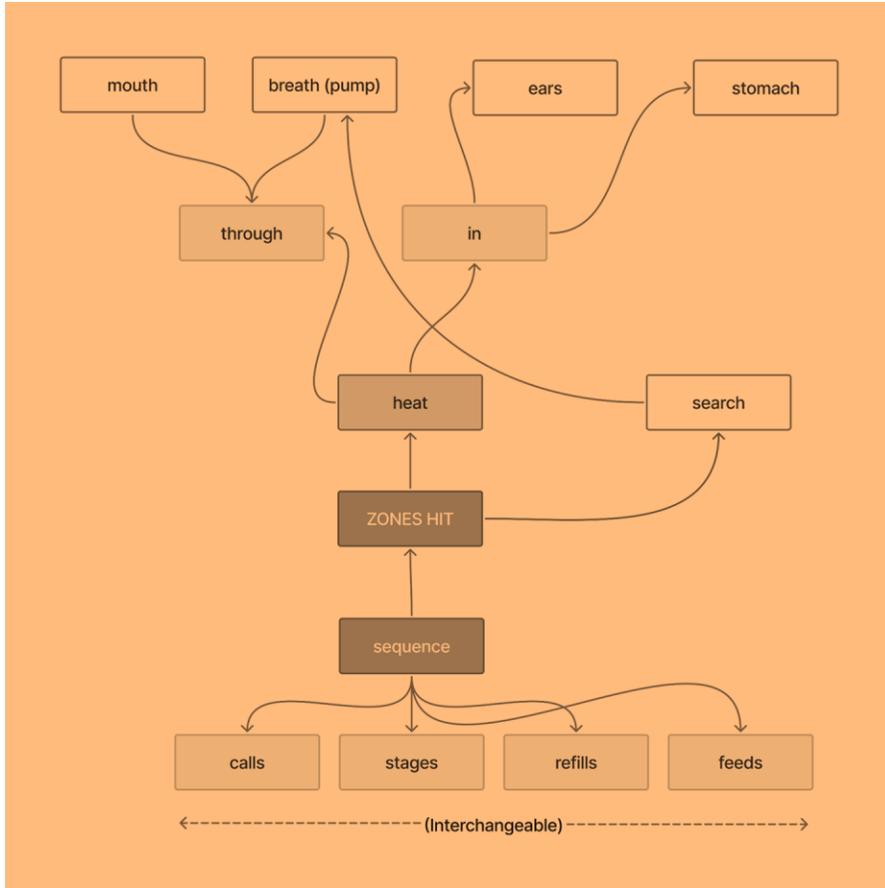Figure 11: (Efficiency as an art form of the street food vendor.)

Figure 12:The sequential process of a street food vendor catering to clients.
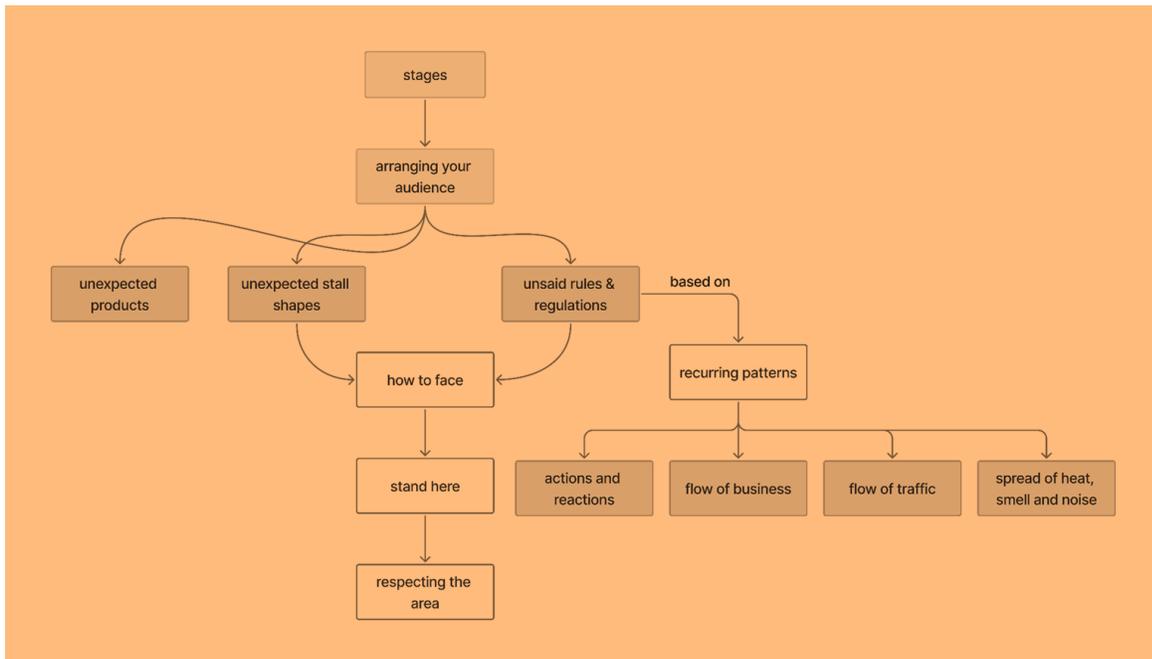
Figure 13:How does a street food vendor arranges his clients(audience).
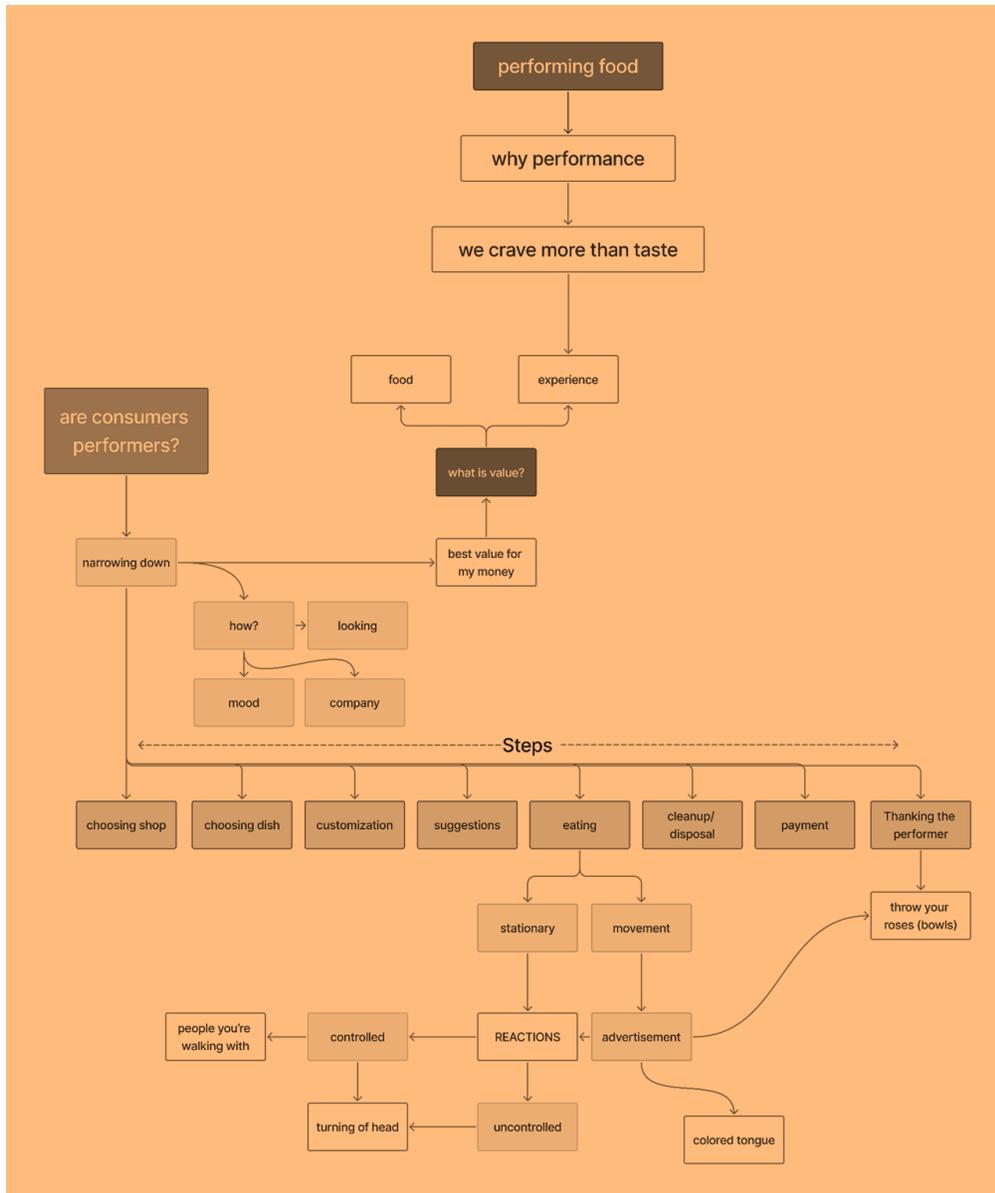
Figure 14: (Consumers participation through performance)

What is the customer narrowing down? The best value for his money, the best value for his buck. The customer is looking for delicious food with great experience all within a respectable amount to pay.

The stall becomes a space where temperament becomes taste, and mood turns into method. A regular doesn't just return for flavour but they come back for the familiar performance- same order, same seat

at the table, same environment that evoke a sense of belonging. And the customer is content with this act of service. The food and the vendor start to reflect each other. They are both heavily influenced by each other. One cannot be defined without the other.

A Vendor's Family -

Hidden behind the stalls lies an obscured network. Family involvement reshapes scale, ambition and risk. Some stalls turn into inherited systems, divided among siblings into similar businesses. Others remain solo, protected from family ties to maintain independence.
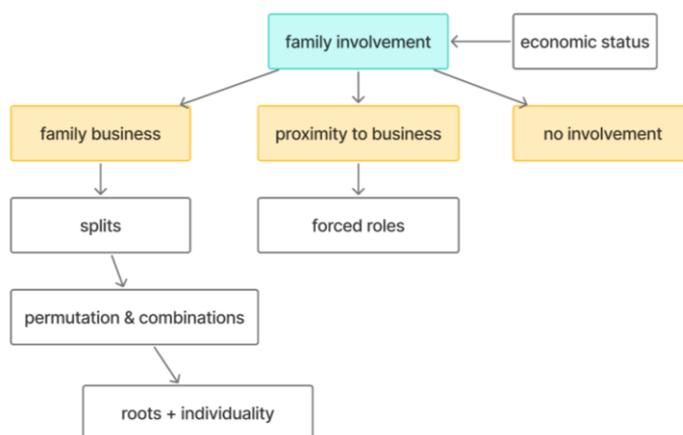
Figure 15: Family involvement in local businesses.

Economic Status and its Correlation

Economic status is not earned but rather shared. The economic status of a vendor entity is directly correlated to his brand and food. Such factors may include but are not limited to brand authenticity, its quality, uniformity of their services, limited growth or operational risks. The vendor's brand also endorses the neighbouring business as the vendor's credibility and input is highly acknowledged.

Section 4 – Shahjahanabad: A Map That Isn't Just Lines

This study of Shahjahanabad starts with a map, but it's not one that simply marks the roads and the monuments. This is an emotional map, a sensory guide consisting of numerous stories, conversations, skills and memories.

Figure 17: Diary Sketch during Field visit.

Every street interview, chai-side chat and hazed memories of countless stories bridge together to form the larger picture- an art that does not wish to be finished but still hell bent on being honest.

Philosophy:	
"Out of this exciting search for the interplay between beauty, cultures and design will come a new and sensory frugality" – Victor Papanek	
Location	**Essence**
Lal Qila:	the emblematic heart, with history so deeply embedded in us.
Chandni Chowk:	the centre of commerce, community and chaos.
Chawri Bazar:	Paper, brass, folklore and forgotten deities who still live inside the walls.
Fatehpuri Masjid to Jama Masjid Corridor:	the connecting labyrinth of faith, food and foot traffic.
Insight and Thought: These spots and many others like these evoke an emotional journey in all of us. The curiosity, the intimacy, the responsibility and even the discomfort.	

Table 17: Diary Excerpt on Location based feelings.

HAVELI: The word alone carries significance. The comically large courtyards that soaked up all the sunlight, "jharokhas" framing the street like living portraits and doors that have hundreds of years of history behind them. When we envision Shahjahanabad, we encapsulate two different emotions. One that is tangible and one that is intangible.Losing a haveli means more than just losing the well patinated walls, the beautifully constructed arches that adorn the haveli walls and gateways or the patterned bricks. You lose a way of living, a lifestyle.

Table 18: Diary Entry on Haveli.

HERITAGE

The Intangible Heritage:
a. The intangible heritage is something that can't be seen or felt thus it is the most overlooked sense of heritage it is so underappreciated and overlooked- the professions, the stories, the oral knowledge, the rituals, the craftsmanship, the dialects they all come together in our community to develop a sense of identity that is so deeply rooted and valiant in nature. b. The haveli doesn't survive on stone and bricks alone. It lives through the people who still call it their home.
Identity: Individual and Collective:
In Shahjahanabad, identity isn't just a name, but their livelihood. A profession becomes a street: GaliQasimJaan, Dariba Kalan, Kinari Bazaar. The map becomes a story of its people.
The Vanishing Knowledge:
Local knowledge doesn't disappear quietly. When people are displaced, professions fade, and communities scatter with it also goes the oral history. Government efforts to "modernize" often erase what can't be easily archived: memory, habits, and crafts.
Insight:
A city that is still there but gradually losing its identity.
PreservingtheIntangible Heritage:
a. Local knowledge does not remain on its own, it's crucial for the government to diligently take initiatives to preserve the culture and heritage. b. Proper government policies and initiatives should be in accord with the delicate needs of these culturally significant places.

Table 19: Diary Excerpt on Heritage.

How Can It Be A Place That Belongs to The Artists and People Together?

One can argue that artisans are the object of anthropological importance. They have played an integral role in generating living links between material culture and the social structure. Some such key factors include being the custodian of cultural heritage, adaptability to social changes, predetermined social and gendered roles, and many more such factors.

Anecdotes: In old Shahjahanabad, during weddings and festivals, a square piece of cloth referred to as "*chandua"* —would stretch across courtyards and temple spaces tied to the four walls. It wasn't just decoration. It served as a shelter, a symbol and collective effort of the celebrating community.
Then: Art served a practical purpose and not just a decorative one. Tiles, baskets, fabrics, and everyday tools had beauty integrated into daily life.
Now: Art is often personal, curated, or turned into a commodity. A luxury, not a necessity.
Insight and Thought: If the useful beauty of the past is called heritage, what are we producing today that the future will recognize as ours? Heritage is not a fixed concept. It's a dialogue across time. It's flexible, it's what people of such times decide.

Table 20: Diary Entry on Artists and Artisans.

Tangible Heritage:The Architecture that Builds and Grows

Title: Bricks and Stories United
Then:
The transition from lakhori bricks to modern kiln-fired bricks represents a deeper shift in architectural thinking. Lakhori bricks, which are thin and handmade, allowed for precision, curves, and intricate detailing, making buildings lighter, climate-responsive, and closely tied to local ecology and labour. Architecture was shaped by environmental intelligence. Courtyards carried sound and social life; sunlight was invited. Spaces remain rich in nature.
Now:
Materials became standardized and construction prioritized speed, durability, and scale. Function began to outweigh craft, and efficiency often replaced sensory experience. Aesthetics and craftsmanship became secondary or ornamental. This shift reflects a broader change in priorities. From architecture as a cultural and environmental space to simply being a product of the modern-day economic empire.

Table 21: Diary Entry on Tangible Heritage

An average middle-class home today rarely holds art, sculpture, or decoration. Artistic enjoyment has become a luxury reserved only for the richest of the rich or the people heavily influenced and having a strong sense of cultural identity, which too is rare to come by for an average demography rather than a standard. Modernism has streamlined not just spaces but also sensibilities.

Living in A Syncretic City

Syncretic means blending of beliefs, cultures, philosophies, and styles into something shared and newly manifested.
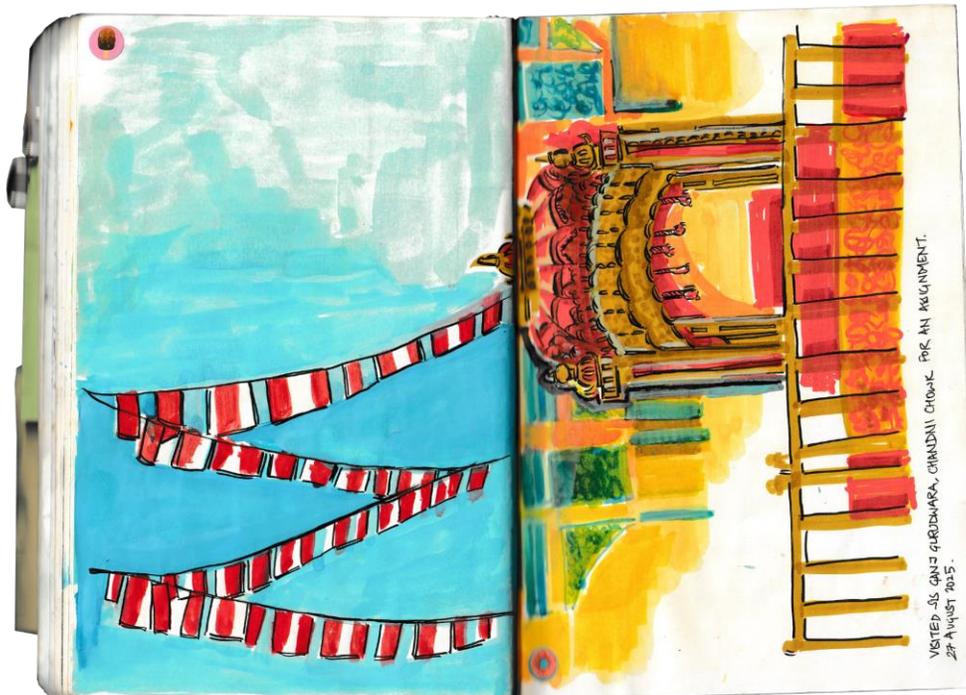
Figure 18: Sketch of Sis Ganj Gurudwara.

What Goes Along with It?

Nowadays, heritage is often seen as background. Not as relevant anymore. "*Gutka*" stains mark ancient walls. Trash piles up at historic gates. Outrage lasts a week, then fades. Even events that shock the nation, like attacks on heritage sites later become mere news stories, not milestones. Thus, the decline in the cultural sensitivity in this generation. Every so often there are cases of riots and attacks which are directly aimed at destroying the cultural integrity and history of these delicate structures. But what is to be noted is how little we care about the heritage site. People cared for

this news for hardly a week and then moved on with their day to day lives.

Notes:
Unphased by big changes - no sense of community left - individual worlds are becoming smaller and smaller. Our worlds are shrinking. They are becoming more individualistic and less communal.
Mental Manifestations
Mental Manifestations are deeply cared for in their sentiment. Urban folklore even still holds the vast communities together **"Bhootwaligali"** **"The spirit at the peepal ka ped"** **These stories didn't just evoke fear; they also expressed belonging.**
Social Manifestations
Religious festivals were community celebrations. Ramleela before Dussehra, though rooted in Hindu tradition, became a shared cultural performance across faiths without any disparities over religious discrimination. It was truly and solely meant to be a time of community bonding and sense of brotherhood.
Physical Manifestations
In Chawri Bazaar, a famous legend tells us about a wall temple that remembers an imagined Sufi saint 'Saiyaad Badshah ka Aala'. Described as a six-foot figure in stark white garments, he exists only in street folklore. People still light candles there. And hand garlands in his name. Faith, in this context, is a shared act of imagination that holds the community together.

Table 22: Diary Notes on Mental, Social and Physical Manifestation.
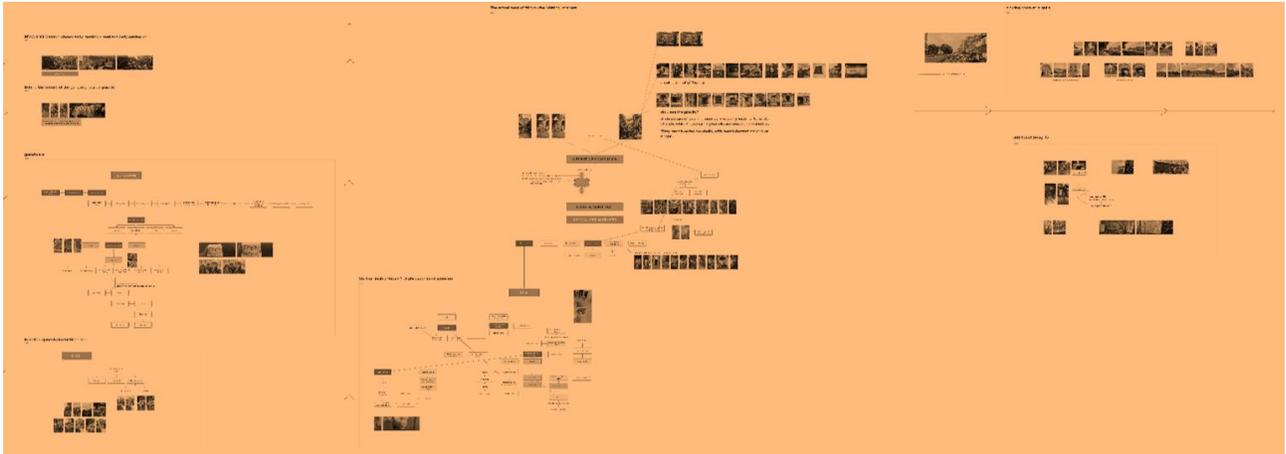
Figure 19: (A sequential mind map documenting the activities undertaken during the first field visit to Shahjahanabad.)
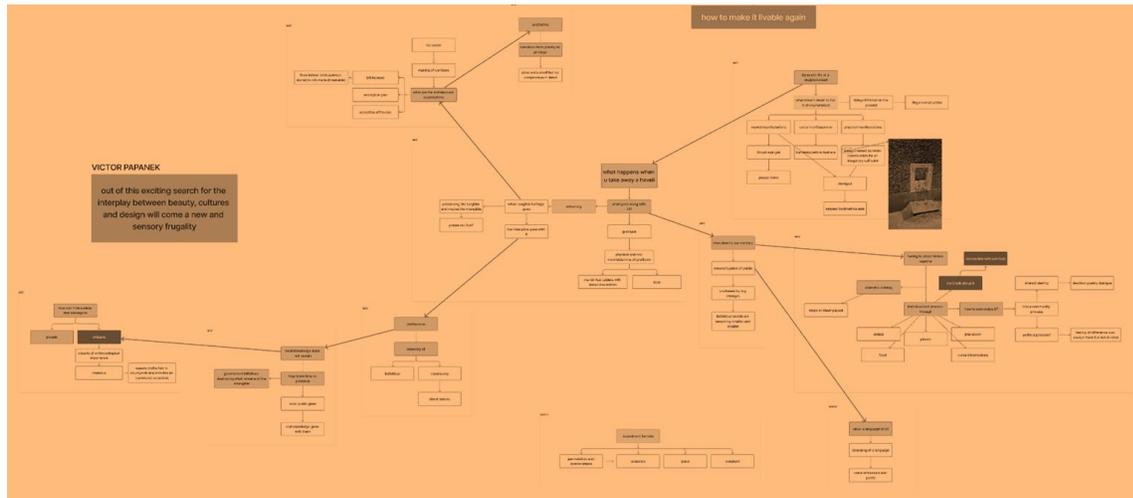

Figure 20: (Mapping of shahjahanabad and its current problems by examining historical context
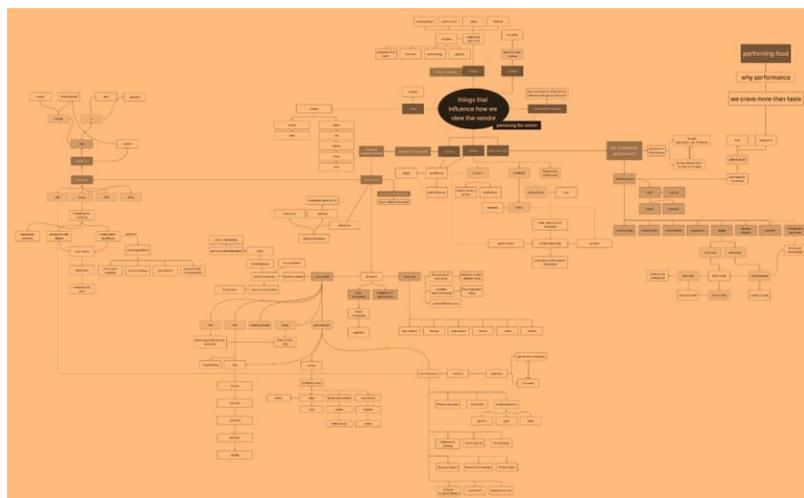
Figure 21: Performing food: Things that Influence aura of street food vendor.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER
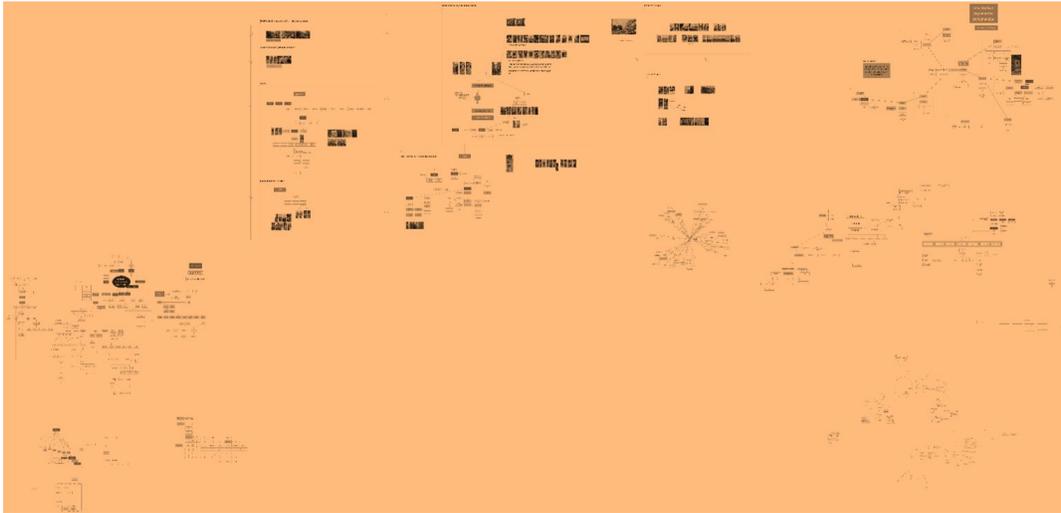
Figure 22: How thefigjammind map looked by the end!

Conclusion

In the streets of India, you can see the chaos, disorganization and half biased planning at first glance. Yet, upon closer inspection it reveals a carefully crafted system based on frugality, improvisation, memory and daily mundane routines. Tea vendors not only crowd the streets but also play an integral part in protecting them. Workshops, shops, social responsibilities, temporary settlements and adaptations influence how people move, gather and interact. Their stalls act as a small but significantly powerful landmark around which life unfolds throughout the city.

These individuals are seemingly invisible not because of their absence but because of their constant presence that customers take for granted. Despite their great skill, familiarity has overshadowed their effort and work. In particular, the tea stalls function as a stable and persistent social hub, balancing the public and private, the solitary and the communal. It engrossed and reflected the rhythms

of its surroundings, subtly guiding the identity of the street. It educated us that public spaces are shaped not by architecture or community but also by the intangible elements that sustain the everyday lives of people.

In a historically rich area like Shahjahanabad, the nuance is of profound and utmost importance. As the physical heritage deteriorates and revitalization focuses on functionality rather than the experience itself, the historic order and aspects like gestures, cultural traditions, social customs and local economies are at an ever so increasing risk. The disappearance of a single vendor, routine or shared moment may seem insignificant, but it signals the gradual erosion of cultural memory. When these everyday practices disappear. The city remains, but its living identity is lost forever.

This study advocated a more holistic approach to preservation for the heritage that defines the place. One that recognizes the street as a living archive and vendors as its guardians. Heritage protection need not be limited to monuments and buildings alone. It should include the microcosm which binds everything together and bring them to life every day.Living the moment with the tea vendor, watching their work with respect and attention to detail. Appreciating and recognising these role means recognising that the vitality of the city lies not only in its imposing structure, but in the quiet resilience of the people who,

day after day,   *set up their stalls*   *and cup by cup,*   *they weave the fabric of the street.*

Table 23: Diary Entry Conclusion.

Future Scope

Creating temptation. The streets are an endless source of knowledge and experiences so we isolate and relate and conduct experimentation to explore these ideas further. For a fuller and sensory experience. Reimagining the digital space inspired from the physical space and educating the public for mindful design.The streets function as an endless source of interactions and lived experiences. The final scope of this research is to isolate specific patterns, behaviours, and spatial negotiations observed on the street, and to reinterpret them through experimentation. By extracting these insights and studying them closely, the aim is to create a more layered, fuller, and sensory understanding of public life.One key objective is the creation of temptation—not in a commercial sense, but as a design strategy. How can spaces invite participation the way a chaiwala's aroma draws passers-by? How can environments stimulate curiosity, engagement, and emotional involvement rather than passive consumption?

This research also seeks to reimagine digital space through lessons borrowed from physical space. Streets are interactive, unpredictable, multi-sensory, and socially negotiated. In contrast, digital platforms often flatten experience into isolated transactions. By studying street dynamics an attempt needs to be made to reimagine the digital landscape to reflect such characteristics. Another critical scope is public education. Through visual representation, presentation, and dissemination, the project aims to make people more aware of the design intelligence embedded in everyday life. The goal is not merely to document but to shift perception—to encourage more thoughtful, context-driven design that respects social behaviour, memory, and environment.

Ultimately, this research moves from observation to application:

> *from street to system,*
>
> *from sensory experience to structured insight,*
>
> *from informal knowledge to intentional design.*

Table 24: Diary Entry Fututre Scope

The final scope is not just to understand the street—but to learn from it, translate it, and redesign with it.

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The Fractal and The Hydra: Questions on conservation successes and struggles in India

Malhar Mazumdar

Abstract

This article discusses wildlife conservation stories in India, and asks whether they are successes, between the official numbers and ground reality situations. Visiting the birthplace of Project Tiger, Jim Corbett National Park, to understand what tiger population statistics indicate for the overall health of the animal in the region, and discusses strange behaviours recorded in tigers there upon a field visit. The articlealso looks at the current state of the Great Indian Bustard – and how it has been failed by India, and its dwindling numbers. It explores the conservation of the Bengal Florican, and how despite a lack of attention, its path can still be different from the GIB's. The article concludes with a huge amount of questions, on what wildlife conservation even means, on how it can be done without harming human beings, and on whether it is possible to reverse the damage already done.

Keywords

wildlife conservation, charismatic megafauna, critically endangered species, habitat degradation, bambi effect, core zones, tiger reserves, national parks, prey density, grassland protection, wasteland designation

Introduction

The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 is an Act of the Parliament of India to provide for "the protection of wild animals, birds and plants and for matters connected therewith or ancillary or incidental thereto with a view to ensuring the ecological and environmental security of the country." (from Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972). Before 1972, India had only five National Parks. Among other reforms, the Act established scheduled protected plants and hunting certain animal species or harvesting these species was largely outlawed.

This act is the foundation on which wildlife conservation work in India is based. All work done to protect wildlife, and natural environments in India is done because of this act. This act is supposed to protect and help the nation's biodiversity and natural wonders thrive. The reality of the situation leaves much to desire, however. Over 950 animal species and 600 plant species are listed as Critically Endangered, Endangered, or Vulnerable by the IUCN in India. Most of them display decreasing population trends.

Project Tiger in Corbett

In 1930, the Bengal Tiger (*Panthera Tigris Tigris*) population in India was around 40,000. By 1973, the population had fallen to approximately 1827, caused by severe habitat loss, human-animal conflict, poaching, game hunting, etc. Project Tiger was initiated, fresh off the heels of the just passed Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, in order to protect the highly fragmented and at-risk population of tigers from imminent extinction. Jim Corbett National Park was the first place where Project Tiger was implemented, and so it is designated as the first Tiger Reserve in India.
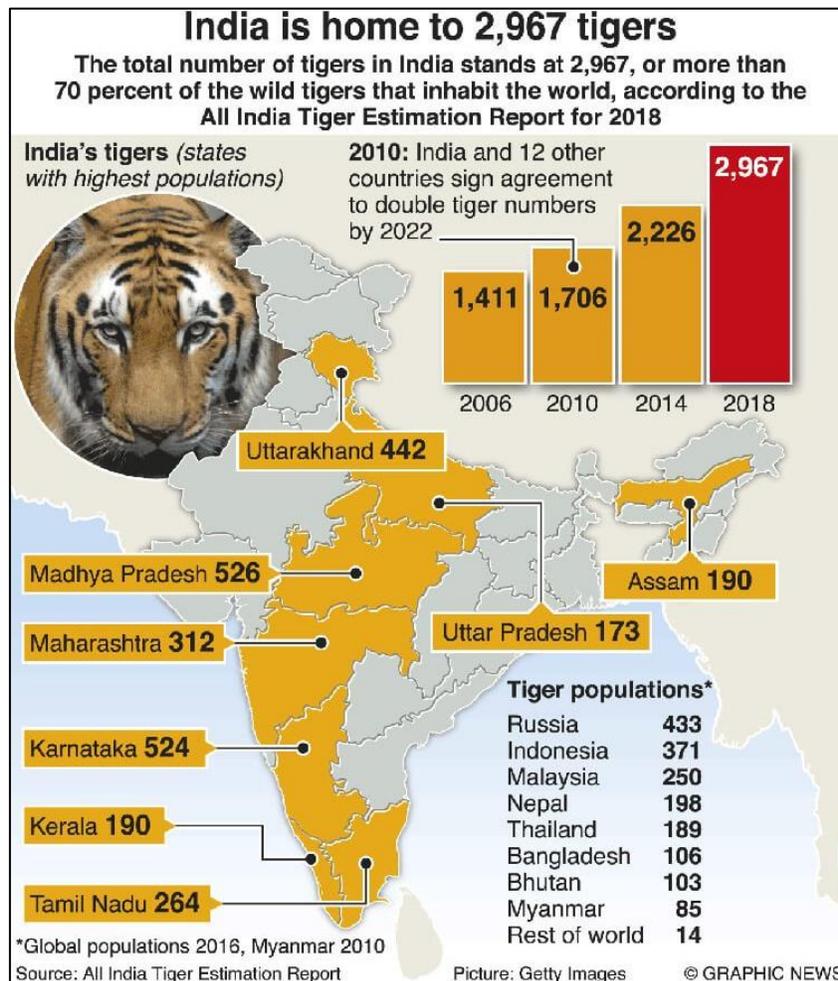
Figure 1. Tiger population in India, from All India Tiger Estimation Report

Project Tiger seeked to establish 'core zones', areas within Tiger Reserves that would remain untouched by any human activity to protect the tiger and its habitat and to allow the tiger to free roam within the zone. Around the core zone there would be 'buffer zones', areas which are less frequented by wildlife, and so put at less risk by human activity. These areas would be carefully monitored to allow some human activity in them, primarily for the purpose of providing livelihoods to people living around the forest.

Project Tiger has been widely hailed as a success "the planet's biggest conservation success story", (From Tiger Tiger Burning

Bright, a book tribute to 50 years of Project Tiger by Vijay Mohan Raj and Yashpal Rathore). As of 2022, the tiger population was estimated to be at 3682, doubling the population from where it began in 1973. The success of population increase is clearly noted in Jim Corbett NP, the most famous Tiger Reserve in India, was estimated to be around 260 in 2022. However, numbers on a graph may not be the best at reflecting a sad reality that is noted on-ground in Corbett, visible to the forest guards, guides, drivers, and even the discerning tourist – tiger territories are shrinking.

How much territory does a tiger need?

Tiger territory depends on the prevalence of prey. If prey is easily available, territories of female and male tigers can be as small as 5 and 10 sq.km respectively. In areas with a dearth of prey, territories can go up to 1000 sq.km pertiger. On average, females occupy 5-20 sq.km while males occupy 15-100 sq.km of territory in India.

The Jim Corbett National Park (core area) is approximately 520 sq. km. The Tiger Reserve area is larger,1288.31 sq. km comprising the nearby 301.17 sq. km Sonanadi Wildlife Sanctuary, alongside a 466.32 sq. km buffer zone. If a simple mean is taken of tiger territory in the Jim Corbett Tiger Reserve.

$$1288.31 \div 260 = 4.95 \, sq.km.$$

Figure 2. Calculating Area for 1288 sq.km with 260 Tigers.

This above number, rounded upwards to 5 sq. km. is the minimum extent of a female tiger's territory, in an *ideal* of prey abundance in the entire reserve. This statistic informs Jim Corbett's 'boast' of being the most tiger-dense area in the world.

Figure 3. Map of Corbett Tiger Reserve, from corbetttigerreserve.in

But is this a boast?

Although unverified, it can be told simply by taking a tour of the park, and speaking to those who work and live there, that there is no abundance of prey. Sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*), the favourite prey species of the tiger, are used as an indicator of prey density. After 3 days of touring around the same zone within Corbett in January of 2026 — an area known as "Sambar Road" due to it once being a hotspot for the large ungulate, and a prime tiger territory owing to the river, grassland and woodland biomes — one singular deer was spotted. The same area is divided into the territory of two dominant females, split by the Ramganga river, along with a total of 3 semi-adult cubs, which will soon separate from their mothers and search for new territory or compete with each other. This led the following question.

"Has Project Tiger been truly successful if we increased tiger populations but not tiger territories or habitats?"

Changes in behaviour

The entire Sambar Road region – from Dhikala to Khinanauli camps, and on both sides of the river used to be a singular tiger's territory 10 years ago. The current dominant females are both daughters of that tiger, and have split the already small territory. Such a high density of tigers for what is a solitary animal has led to a decrease in prey, and may lead to conflict between tigers in the future.

One example of unusual behaviour was observed in January. The daughter of one dominant tigress, of the cross-river area known as "paar", crossed into the other tigress's territory. What would usually be seen as a challenge by a competitor (adult tigers do not value relations outside of their own cubs), was met with playful behaviour from the female, and exchanges of affection between niece and aunt, quite a bewildering sight even for those who had been working at the park for over 3 decades.

Figures 4 and 5. Photos of two distantly related tigers showing affection, captured in Corbett NP by author.

"Will dense tiger populations lead to altered behaviour? Has it already?"

Charismatic Megafauna and The Bambi Effect

Charismatic megafauna are large animal species, particularly mammals, that have a widespread popular appeal or symbolic value.

These animals are well known by the general public, and on average have the most efforts dedicated to their conservation. While conservation efforts directed to them are oftentimes beneficial in restoring the entire ecosystem in which they inhabit, there are issues with their popularity. One is that unchecked tourism to see them can disturb the species, especially seeing as a majority of charismatic megafauna are also endangered species.
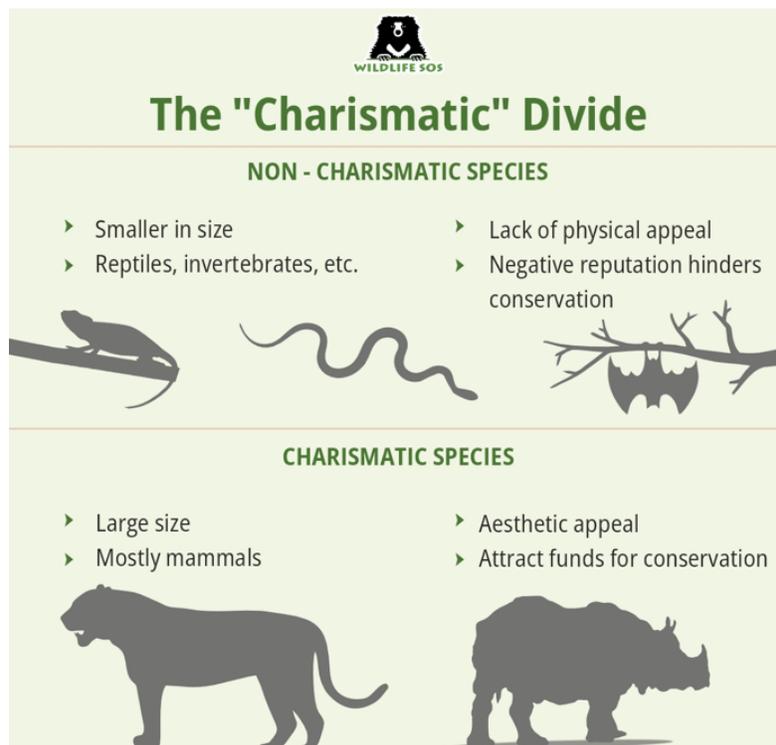
Figure 6. Charismatic Species, from wildlifesos.org

The other is the Bambi effect – people have objections to seeing harm towards animals that there is a perceived fondness of, particularly popular animals considered "cool" or "cute". Conservation efforts are more often directed to these animals, while more physically unappealing animals, which usually carry negative reputations are ignored.

"Is the amount of attention we give the tiger misguided?"

The story of the Great Indian Bustard

The Great Indian Bustard (*Ardeotisnigriceps*) is the largest bird in India, and one of the heaviest flying birds in the world. In 1963, it was considered for the National bird of India, (strongly supported by Dr. Salim Ali), but was rejected in favour of the Indian Peafowl.

Figure 7. The Great Indian Bustar aka. Godawan, Adobe Stock Pics.

Though it used to be a commonsight in the open dry grasslands throughout western and central India, it is now critically endangered, with the population shrinking every year. The bustard was deemed a protected animal, but with very poor implementation and care as compared to the Tiger, Leopard, the Elephant, and many other well-known endangered species.

"Although it was brought under the umbrella of Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, it did not gain attention and remained BPL (Below Protection Line). Once more than 1000 individuals few decades back, bustard population shrunk to 745 in the year 1978, 600 in 2001, 300 in 2008 and not more than 125 in the current year, 2013."

Project Great Indian Bustard was implemented in 2013, with the aim of restoring the Bustard population. While concentrated efforts are now being made, Bustards are large animals, and very slow breeders, with 9 being the world record for eggs hatched in a single year since 2013. Their natural habitat has massively shrunk, as their preferred arid grasslands are termed as "wasteland" by the Government. They are used for grazing, solar farms, and are filled with overhead transmission cables, which the bird sometimes fatally crashes into mid-flight. Hope for the GIB remains, but it is slim.

"Was the Bustard unworthy of protection because it wasn't a national symbol?"

What can be learned and applied from the Great Indian Bustard?

Looking forward, India has to make efforts to not repeat its mistakes with the Great Indian Bustard. The closest place we can apply learnings from the GIB is in its close relatives, the Lesser and Bengal Floricans. Both are critically endangered bustards, albeit with larger populations and ranges than the GIB, meaning more hope for their species' survival.

Figure 8: Male Bengal Florican near Manas NP, taken by Author.

The Bengal Florican, in Manas National Park

A large and rare bustard, the Bengal Florican (*Houbaropsisbengalensis*) used to once be widespread across the Indo-Gangetic plains, but is now restricted to highly local pockets of Nepal, Northern and Eastern India, and to a population in Cambodia. Little is understood about this bird's behaviour, as it is a very shy and seldom seen bird. Estimates vary, but the general consensus remains that less than 1000 birds remain in the wild. While populations are stabilized in protected areas and National parks in Nepal, and India, there is rapid decline and shrinking of the suitable grassland territory for its breeding and residence outside of those protected areas. Afforestation, invasive species, agricultural use, encroachment all have led to florican habitat shrinking, and florican populations continue to drop with very little awareness, or projects from the centre.

Figure 9. A recent incident of a Bengal Florican being poached to be made into stew, only discovered because the perpetrators posted it to Facebook, from indiatodayne.in

In Manas National Park, the highest population of this species is recorded (estimated to be 60), particularly in Kokilabari Agriculture Farm (KAF). Though it is farmland and often disturbed by humans, The florican chooses to breed in this area as its unburnt grasses provide good habitat. However, the long-term survival of this habitat is in question – with cows roaming, jeeps being permitted for wildlife safaris, can the florican persist in this area? Invasive *Chromolaenaodorata* bushes cover the landscape of Manas – no animal eats it, and it grows back year after year, even when burnt. Plants to increase grassland florican habitat are in place with the help of local villagers, but whether the birds chose to nest in the area or not is not sure. Poaching incidents continue to occur, and Bengal Florican killings make the news a few times a year. For such a threatened species, even a few untimely deaths per year can spell doom.

These birds practise site fidelity – they return to the same exact areas year after year to breed. However, they are quite sensitive species, and are only local to specific core protected areas. There is not enough habitat for them to spread outside of these hotspots. Though local groups are working in conservation of these species, there is quite a lack of recognition by the Central Government to restore their habitats so that they can be widespread once again.

"Will India repeat the tragedy of the GIB with the Bengal Florican?"

Mind Map

MONEY! TIME! EFFORT!
BATTLES! CAMPAIGNS!
NOT FOR FREE!!

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

PROBLEMS

Rising Population → Land Acquisition

WHERE WILL PEOPLE GO? HOW DO WE DEVELOP?

Natural Resource Exploitation

Mining | Logging | Solar/Wind Farms | Diverting Water

Industrial Runoff

Switch to Nuclear/ Clean energy

Public Sentiment? Fossil Lobby...!!!

Decrease Operations

Unemployment?

Demand for Resources?

Grazing

Protect Grasslands

Livestock need food !!

Uprooted, Hinder Way of life !!

LERNEAN HYDRA!

WHAT CAN THEY EVEN DO?
PEOPLE STILL DO NOT ACT

GOVT. KYA HI KAREGA?

AWARE KARKE KYA UKHAADA?

KITNE DOCUMENTARY BANAOGE? KITNE LOG DEKHENGE?

MEDIA

PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS
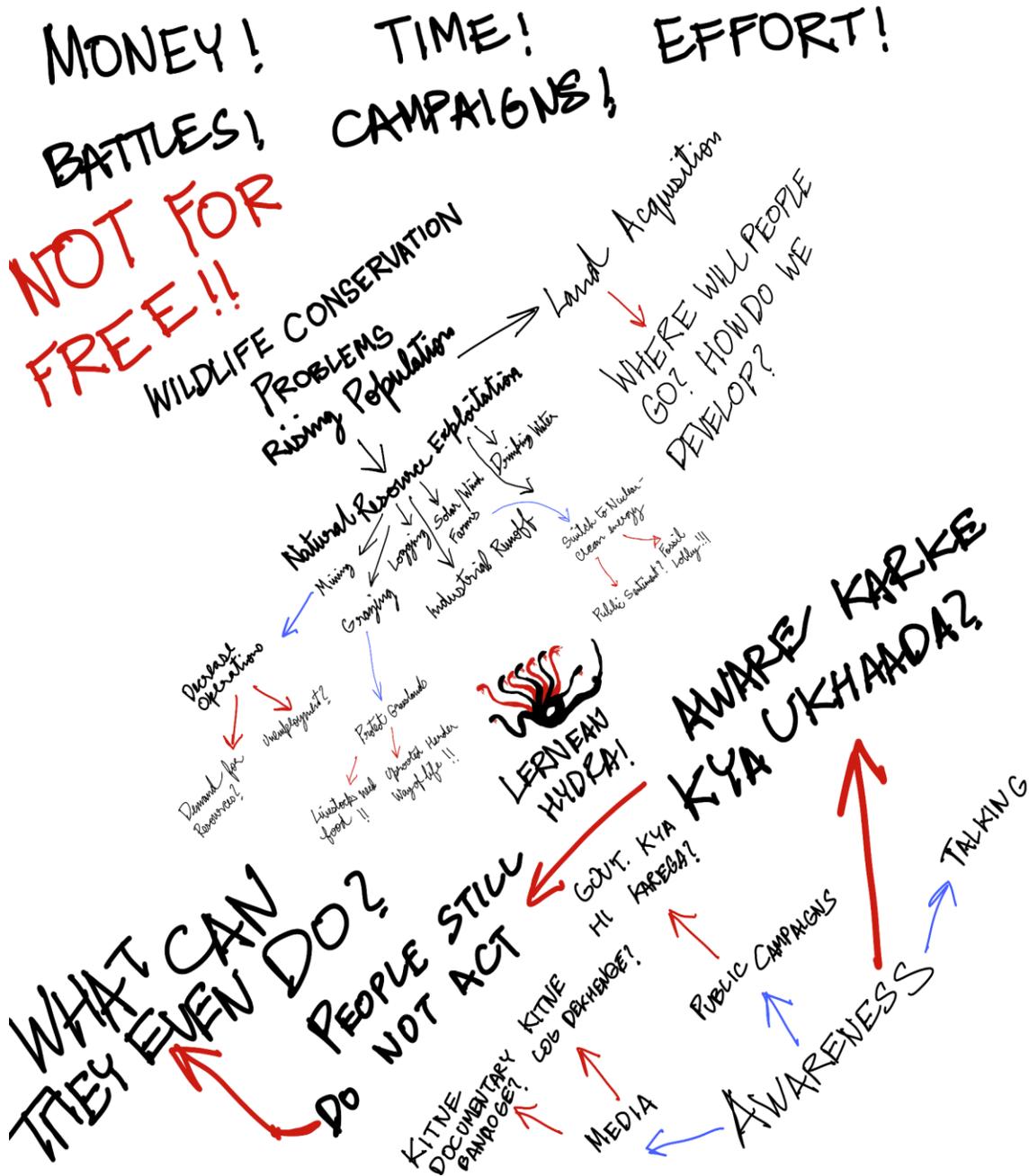
AWARENESS → TALKING

AWARENESS

Figure 10. Thinking out Loud.

Conclusion – The Fractal and The Hydra

The topic of wildlife conservation is fractal. Like most real-life issues, it only gets more and more intricate the more one looks into it, unravelling into a labyrinthine mess of both highly localised and highly universal causes, factors, stakeholders, problems, solutions, and questions. Many more questions remain, undiscussed by this article. How to combat invasive species, which devastate our natural ecosystems? If National Parks are the highest extent of our protection, why aren't they enough? How do we deal with over tourism? How do we get the public to care?What can we even do to help?

Beginning to deal with the problems is like fighting a hydra. You cut off one head — you try to solve one problem — and you spawn many more. We increase the area of Corbett Tiger Reserve? The populations around the reserve must be dislocated. Where will we settle them? How do we expect them to change their way of life, revolving around the forest for centuries? If we shut down solar farms, grazing, and afforestation in Rajasthan to restore the Great Indian Bustard's natural habitat – will we return to fossil fuels to power those areas? How will herders feed their livestock?

Humans cannot be ignored. Most wildlife conservation happens at the expense of people, especially poor rural or tribal communities, the most marginalised people in our country. Conservation work that seeks to help wildlife must have the help of people in its manifesto, or it will remain unsupported, underfunded, and most importantly will cause harm.What can we even do to help?

Should broader society continue to wash their hands with the topic of wildlife conservation? Why should they care? Most people spend their entire lives trying to provide for themselves and their family, to improve their situation so that they can live better lives. It is easy to write an article, saying not enough is being done and we should do more. But for a majority of the world, asking them to passionately dedicate themselves to the cause of wildlife protection, something which will bring them no material gain, is unequivocally naive. And even if they cared, if a billion people were deeply moved by the plight of our natural ecosystems and compelled to action, what could they do? Petition the Government? Protest? For every creature, big or small? Or every ecosystem, from rainforest to desert? For every person living around nature, poor or rich? Is it feasible to ask every single person to be educated about every single cause in the world when we already have so much on our plate, just in our lives? And yet can we afford to keep our mental peace, at the expense of our planet?

Figure 11. Thinking in Silence.

"So many questions — where are the answers?"

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