

Death traps: Holes in urban India

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Harris Solomon** 

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Abstract

This article is an ethnographic study of potholes in roads in urban India. The article describes different forms of attention to potholes, including cases of media advocacy, clinical reflections on injury and attempts by an accident survivor to document danger on the roads. Throughout, it argues for attention to the embodiment of infrastructure, and particularly, how people move through infrastructures. The article stems from a broader research project about traumatic injury from traffic accidents, many due to potholes. Taking these cases as sentinels of urban wound culture, the article asks: What if urban theory took wounding as a characteristic feature of everyday urbanism? What might this mean for studies of infrastructure's affordances, risks and embodiment?

Keywords

Embodiment, health, infrastructure, India, injury, trauma, vulnerability

Introduction: Down the hole

It was late August 2017, the peak of monsoon season, and the rains were unusually heavy in Mumbai. The streets flooded and the monsoon eroded a city under constant regimes of land and water system redevelopment, turning ecologies of urbanism into headlines (Gandy, 2014; Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan, 2013). Televisions broadcast waters rising in homes and messages to stay safe, and people at work saw these images and tried to go home. It was the unseen that made trouble, the absent presences. A doctor tried driving home from his hospital job. The car stalled, so he left it and attempted to walk through the flooded streets knee-deep with rain. And then, he was gone. He fell into an open manhole, a hole he presumably could not see.

The doctor's (dead) body appeared several days later, several kilometres away. Reportage and everyday discussions centred on the manhole: Why was it open? Who left it open?

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Accusations flew, some blaming city officials for neglecting to cover these essential portals that drain danger in the island city, and that this time drained life from a person and a family. The municipality conducted an inquiry, and cited eyewitness reports that someone pried the manhole open with a bamboo stick to direct draining, presumably to prevent flood waters entering this person's own home. The official inquiry report absolved the city government of any wrongdoing, and proposed installing nets inside manholes (Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, 2018). The solution to unruly holes would be a net, a structure of orderly holes that lets water pass while catching bodies falling in.

Several days after this death in a manhole, a Mumbai police constable rode home on his motorcycle in the early morning. His bike hit a pothole, a hole he reportedly could not see. His head hit the ground, causing traumatic brain injury, and he died in a hospital soon after. The police filed a case of death due to negligence against 'unidentified persons responsible for building and maintenance of the road' (Navalkar, 2017). Who that is, precisely, remains to be seen (just as many of the holes do).

It can be difficult to pin down blame when people move *through* infrastructure, a different sense than people *as* infrastructure (Simone, 2004).¹ This distinction between 'people as' and 'moving through' grounds the central argument of this article. My central claim is that people's interaction with infrastructure produces embodied effects, and these effects are distributed unequally. Bodies are archives of infrastructure (Finkelstein, 2019), material systems and environments. So too are bodies made and unmade through infrastructural interactions.

The claim that people constitute infrastructure is one way of attending to bodies; as Simone notes, this framework can illustrate 'provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used' (2004: 407). People *as* infrastructure is one way of attending to emergent urban politics. Yet, the bodies of people in this framework appear as intact and aggregate. By contrast, this article draws attention to movements of wounded bodies to understand the politics of injurious urban infrastructures. It claims that trauma resides not in the failure of infrastructure, but rather in movements that interface bodies and infrastructures. The nature of trauma from this perspective is one bound up in differences of bodily movements, rather than one immobilized in the figure of the crash (Virilio, 2007). Urban theory that continues to be premised on the shock of the urban, rather than on the shock of the somatic, cannot adequately grapple with these meaningful differences. What if urban theory took wounding as a characteristic feature of everyday urbanism, rather than its exception? What might this mean for studies of infrastructure's affordances, risks and embodiment?

Moving through infrastructure

In a volume dedicated to the relationship between infrastructure and disruptions, Steven Graham notes that 'Disruptions and breakdowns in normal geographies of circulation allow us to excavate the usually hidden politics of flow and connection, of mobility and immobility, within contemporary societies' (2010: 3). Disruptions, Graham suggests, are an important feature of infrastructure because they show the cracks and breaks in the urban edifice. Disruptions interrupt 'normal geographies of circulation,' to use Graham's formulation. I propose a slight shift in Graham's claim. Our tendency is to think about voids, holes, disruptions and stoppages as unplanned errors and the failure of systems. In fact, these are not exceptions at all; they are planned, normal and expected. What I want to examine is how vulnerability distributes as a part of infrastructural systems. The accident is not the aberration; the accident is an expected outcome. The real question at stake is one of

material vulnerology: How is this outcome distributed unequally in bodies? Reflecting on the catastrophic 2005 floods in Mumbai, Colin McFarlane writes that scholars must better attend to relations between infrastructure and agency ‘on an everyday basis’ (2010: 144) through attention to disruption. Taking up that challenge, I argue that holes are an important heuristic for this aim precisely because they are a site of embodied motion.

In this article, I focus on the wounding effects of potholes to make two broader claims about infrastructural disruption. The first concerns movement and the second concerns the fraught connections between bodies and their surrounding environments. First, on movement. Disruptions involve motion, and this is not a seamless process. Bodies snag, and get caught in the urban fabric, and this is a normal and normalizing feature of life. Rather than casting disruptions as movement’s antithesis and error, my provocation here is that disruption might be understood as an essence of movement. Disruption is a feature, not a bug, in the movements of everyday life. Falling through holes is hardly a pause in urban mobility, nor is a motorcycle skidding towards a crash after hitting a pothole. In Mumbai, holes are simply too common to reckon as aberrations, and their movement continues on in bodies, families and communities. To confront normal disruption, then, requires rethinking how moving through cities concretizes critical theory, particularly in terms of the shock and deluge of the urban experience. As Julia Elyachar notes, embodied practices of locomotion ‘can be seen as a social infrastructure in the most practical of ways’ (2011: 96). The embodiment of motion can clarify a broader sense of urban vulnerology (de Boeck, 2016), through embodied practices that co-constitute urban space (Massey, 2005).

This issue of embodiment relates to my second claim regarding bodies and environments, namely that the blurring of ‘body’ and ‘environment’ must be understood in terms of movement’s material effects. One of the key contributions of infrastructure studies is that infrastructures do their work by ‘blending the social and the technical’ even as they also ‘transform the natural in the cultural’ (Graham and Marvin, 2010: 11). If scholars are to grapple with the politics of disruption, then it is crucial to point out how blurs produce embodied consequences. Moving through infrastructures leaves a material trace; wounds are the result of the damage of blurring the domains of ‘body’ and ‘environment.’ As scholars of the US/Mexico border have illuminated, the systematic wounding of migrant bodies in the desert and at the border wall works at the convergence between the natural and the artificial, and between the concrete and the somatic (De Leon, 2015; Jusionyte, 2018a, 2018b). Infrastructure studies, with its emphasis on splinters, fragments and networks, have demonstrated how ‘infrastructural assemblages are involved in the active social production of urban natures’ (Graham and Marvin, 2010: 11). Encounters with infrastructure are the grounds of urban inequalities precisely because they are embodied; blurs between the natural and the cultural have a body count in their wounding effects. The task at hand, then, is to insist on the fleshiness of infrastructure in motion.

To do so requires a rethinking of the flesh at stake. In proposing that disruptions are the basis of infrastructure, I hope to provoke a conversation about what urban theory might look like if the moving, wounded body was its index case, rather than the *flâneur*. Geographer Sapana Doshi argues that while the ‘contradictory ecologies of life and politics’ manifest clearly and violently in bodies, embodiment can be an elusive object in urban studies even when bodies and mobilities are given due attention (2017: 125; Desai et al., 2015; McFarlane, 2018; Sheller, 2004; Sennett, 1994). I concur, and suggest that what counts as ‘the body’ in the city may be difficult to pin down because what scholars are looking for is an intact, unwounded body at rest. This search may be at its limits. When walking in a city is more a technique of dodging careening vehicles, to walk is not to idly take in the world. It is to be exposed to planned violence and lethality even as it is to enjoy the city and to move for

life. One must move to live, but doing so comes with a significance chance of injury and death. A body may leave infrastructure, but that does not necessarily mean that infrastructure leaves the body.

It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that scholars of urban South Asia turn to the gruesome injuries of mobility to theorize sociality. For example, in a chapter entitled 'Death and the Accident,' from his book *Pirate Modernity*, cultural theorist Ravi Sundaram details how the shock of the modern and the urban in India now crystallizes as road accidents (2009). Centring his analysis on Delhi in the 1990s, when spectacular car accidents proliferated as private car ownership did too, Sundaram questions Enlightenment-era and modern European sensibilities and urban planning logics that idealize the moving city. These notions rest on an intact, flowing body at their centre when mapped metaphorically: intersections of the city become like agile connective joints, or expressways like unobstructed blood vessels.

Sundaram upends these logics through an analysis of widespread traffic accidents that mark what he calls 'a wound culture' of urban India. By 'wound culture,' Sundaram means a public cultural sense of being overwhelmed on and by the road, such that 'divisions between private trauma and public tragedy blurred, suggesting a traumatic collapse between inner worlds and the shock of public encounters' (2009: 170–171). A focus on wound culture highlights the interruptions of moving between flesh and space, and shows that wounds can emerge from both stasis and flow (Edensor, 2013).² Importantly, the concept of wound culture captures the normalization of accidents and wounding. In Enlightenment and Eurocentric models of the city, the crash and the wound are destined to be aberrations because of assumptions about circulatory flow and equilibrium. In wound culture, accidents *are* the terms of urban motion; cities move *with* crashes. When bodies move through infrastructures, there are material traces, and the materiality of the city emerges through the ontology of bodies (Chu, 2016).

Similar to how the philosopher of medicine George Canguilhem elucidated pathology and errors as part of normal human physiology (2008), Sundaram points out that bodily disruptions constitute urban life. My interest here is to describe situations of living with holes to understand the stakes of living in wound culture. I extend Sundaram's analytic to potholes, to advance conversations about how encounters with infrastructural disruption mark the politics of inequality in South Asia and beyond (Anand, 2017; Anjaria and McFarlane, 2013; Baviskar, 2013; Bjorkman, 2015; Coleman, 2017; Cross, 2017; Gupta, 2012; Melly, 2017; Roy, 2009; Street, 2012). If one challenge with reckoning infrastructures is the problem of overcoming their environmental determinism, as Nikhil Anand notes (2017: 172), another I address here is the challenge of overcoming the presumed exceptionality of their wounding. The figure of the *flâneur* cannot hold as an exemplar for Southern urbanisms, if we follow Sundaram's claim that the bodies in the cities of the Global South are in a foundational relationship to traffic accidents. In this light, the *flâneur's* nature as a placeholder is telling about the dominance of Euro-American perspectives in urban theory, wherein mobility is a matter of living. By contrast, in cities like Mumbai, mobility is at the heart of everyday life *and* is at the heart of the pervasive damage to everyday life wrought by traffic accidents. Eurocentric theory, premised on the *flâneur*, can grapple with the former but strains to address the latter, because to do so would be to render the *flâneur* subject to the mobilities and immobilities that unfold after the accident occurs, within and beyond clinical domains.

The data for this article derive from ethnographic research between 2014 and 2020 in and around Mumbai's largest municipal public hospital trauma ward. I documented and followed cases of traumatic injury from traffic accidents in the hospital, in train stations, on the roads, on the railways, in police stations, in ICUs, and in the hospital morgue to trace cases

of injuries that result in death. I also visited the homes of the injured who survive and are discharged (Solomon, 2017, 2020, Under Contract). My research on trauma is also informed by a decade-long ethnographic project about the connections between health and urban life in Mumbai (Solomon, 2016).

Inside the hospital, I would see repeated cases of people encountering holes, especially potholes. Repeated cases of injuries from potholes in the ward directed my inquiries out of the hospital towards everyday forms of encounter with and discourses around holes in the city. The sections of the article describe different forms of hole encounters, including cases of media advocacy, clinical reflections and attempts by one accident survivor to document danger on the roads. In the paper's conclusion, I reflect on ways that this relationship offers broader insight into infrastructural disruptions. Ultimately, I demonstrate how scholars might theorize and account for infrastructure through somatic materiality. Being in the thrall of the urban is one thing, but being in the grip of holes is another, and this grip can kill.

City of hollows

Holes hollow out the city. Construction transforms space by producing voids (Huysen, 1997). On the way to the hospital, my taxi trembles along the pocked surface of a street under construction for the newest phase of the Mumbai Metro, a nearly all-underground passage running north-south in the island city. Thirty metres beneath us, machines burrow tunnels that the Metro will eventually snake through. The Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation, the organization responsible for constructing the Metro, has named each boring machine after India's rivers. The machines 'represent force and might, just like a river does', an official noted (Venkatraman, 2018). On the side of the street, men stand chest-deep in a hole, also working with force and might. Morning rush-hour traffic snarls around the hole as the men excavate. 'One government hides gold under the streets, and then the one that follows it digs it up,' my taxi driver observes. Whatever the reasons for the holes, they continually appear, disappear and reappear, as contractors get cash and politicians get kickbacks. Signs on the road speak in the present continuous tense and the passive voice: 'Work in Progress,' or 'Inconvenience is Regretted,' the colonial rhetoric of intransitive apologia that implicates no one. There are promises, too, amidst the warnings and apologies. A sign for the next phase of the Mumbai Metro project suggests in large bold script that disruption will lead to something better in the future: 'Mumbai is Upgrading!' These are the goings-on of the phrase 'work is going on' (*kaam chalu hai*), the everyday expression to describe construction.

The risks that holes pose occur in a context of Mumbai's famous and infamous gridlock traffic, ever intensifying with 250 new cars appearing on the roads each day (Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, 2008). Heavy traffic means that intense vehicle-to-vehicle collisions are low because of slower speeds, but the number of vehicles colliding with pedestrians and motorcycles is very high. Consequently, injuries are the primary cause of death for the 15–24 age group among men in India (Mock et al., 1998; Roy et al., 2010). Beneath many of the crashes, lying under the falls and skids and sideswipes, are spaces where the road suddenly changes its grade or composition. Asphalt turns into gravel, and paver blocks end their pattern, leaving the road gap-toothed. Jagged edges of potholes fill with water in monsoon season, making it impossible to discern their depth. Wheels of motorcycles hit the holes, filling them in momentarily with rubber. Newspapers, social media and everyday conversation refer to holes in the road and especially potholes (*gaddhe*) as 'death traps.' Twitter accounts such as 'Ministry of Potholes' serves as a hub

for Mumbaikars to showcase crumbles in the roads. Complaints fly at the city's central body of governance, called the *Brihanmumbai Mahanagar Palika* or, in everyday parlance, 'BMC' for its earlier name as the *Bombay Municipal Corporation*.

Later on, laws rush in. It is difficult to quantify precisely the degree to which potholes or uneven pavement contribute to injury. That effort seems beside the point to the most visible advocacy groups in India working on preventing accidents. Instead, they tend to focus on individual behaviour change with messages to wear a helmet, wear a seat belt or drive more slowly. These groups also may pursue national-level legal change and advocacy with police, such as the effort to allow bystanders of the accident ('Good Samaritans') to help the injured with impunity, rather than trapping them in legal webs that otherwise deter their intervention. The road and its holes tend to be secondary on this front. This raises questions about what might be enabling infrastructures to 'attack' (Chu, 2014: 351) or how they might be understood as 'rogue' (Kim, 2016: 163). In these cited ethnographic examples – drawn from neighbourhood reforms in China and land mines in the South Korean demilitarized zone – both Chu and Kim insist on the liveliness and generativity of lapses, what Chu terms 'the working effects of disrepair' (2014: 353). Holes can generate such effects, even as they constitute infrastructures.

Much of this advocacy work is based on matters of past and potential injury and death, consonant with a biopolitics of damaged livelihood rights (Feldman, 2017; Fortun, 2009; Redfield, 2013; Sunder Rajan, 2017).³ For example, activists and NGOs may file a Public Interest Litigation that details past injuries associated with a road undergoing long-time unfinished work. Upon inspection of roads in Mumbai that had supposedly been repaired, one report notes that 'engineers were shocked to find entire layers of gravel and stones missing with just a thin film of cement laid on top to hide the shoddy work. A bit like cheap lipstick on chapped, dry lips – it only hides the damage underneath, and that too for a short while' (Despande, 2017).⁴ The result of recent scam investigations has been to punish engineers (Singh, 2018). The roads stay pocked. But the Bombay High Court's own motions, written by the Court's justices, can be scathing. 'Potholes had not been solved from 2016 to 2017,' the Chief Justice wrote in a judgment aimed at city authorities (Indian Express, 2017). His judgment continued: 'How many more people do you want to eliminate till the next monsoon?' (Indian Express, 2017). In the eyes of the Court, potholes may not have been eliminated, but lives have. In juridical terms, the ordering of life and the ordering of movement converge at the hole.

As law becomes an increasingly common way of reckoning with holes, demands for accountability form through accounts of governance. For example, the Indian Ministry of Road Transport and Highways counts potholes in its annual report on road accident deaths. The reports use the term 'pothole' as one form of classification for uneven surfaces. There are also tabulations for deaths due to other forms of disrepair, such as 'loose' surfaces or 'road under repair/construction' or 'corrugated/wavy road'. In sum, these figures add up to the total number of persons killed in road accidents, which are 139,671 deaths in 2014, 146,133 deaths in 2015 and 150,785 deaths in 2016 (Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, 2017). As accident numbers overflow, and with varying forms of data quality, it is clear that the state sees accounting as a key response to death.⁵ Furthermore, it also is clear that accounting can be a site to explore speed and slowdown, given how long it may take for one death to register in reports. Mark Lamont explains this point through his research on road accidents in Kenya:

The slowing down of injury compensation cases, the stoppage of traffic at police roadblocks, and the forensic reporting of the media following horrific high-casualty crashes all demonstrate

the differing paces that regulate roads, drivers and automobiles under the auspices of the centralized state. (Lamont, 2013: 382)

Holes can stop speed in its tracks, and can pause assumptions that acceleration is the only way that infrastructures of injury proceed.

Killer potholes

It is December 2017, several months after the doctor disappeared down the manhole, and after the policeman died when his bike hit a pothole. In those months, I have seen numerous cases of head trauma in the hospital trauma ward, often attributed to potholes by witnesses or patient kin. I speak with one patient named Asif, who is in the ICU following a motorcycle accident.⁶ Asif is in his early 20s, and studies at a local college. He was on his motorcycle with a friend at night, and hit uneven pavement – the edges of a hole. He is among the luckier ones in the ward, as an initial CT scan shows no evidence of traumatic brain injury. His wounds are primarily superficial: Asif bleeds freely from his nose, which is packed with gauze. Compared to the rest of the 13 patients in the trauma ICU, he is doing quite well, and will be shifted to a regular ward soon. He is out of danger. The others in beds around him are out of the holes of the street as well. However, for them, danger remains in the form of brain haemorrhages, blunt abdominal trauma and orthopaedic injury. Some will die, and some will be discharged, often with disabilities that carry intense semantic and experiential weight (Das and Addlakha, 2007; Friedner, 2017; Staples, 2011).

Asif's friend Nasir stands by his bed. Nasir blames the potholes for the accident. The road was uneven and had holes, he says. But what can they do? How can one lodge a complaint against a hole? These roads in Mumbai are 'not proper,' he says. 'I've read the Indian Constitution,' Nasir says, and 'good roads are a fundamental human right.' But roads-as-rights has yet to appear in the courts, and so there was a hole in the law. If Asif claimed bad road infrastructure as the cause of his accident, no one would listen, Nasir says. The arbiters of things, the police, 'only want to hear that Asif was speeding.' The onus is on the person on the bike to prove innocence in the face of accusations of speeding or reckless driving. Speed becomes the metric of innocence or guilt. The thing you speed on (or not) – that is, the road – goes scot-free. This demonstrates a silent consensus about the legally inert character of larger vehicles, a point raised by both Jain (2006) in the United States and Lamont (2012, 2013) in Kenya. Yet the type of vehicle matters in this case. All vehicles on the road presumably pass over holes, but certain ones are more likely to get stuck, or send the rider tumbling out. It is in this moment – the collision – where the fusion of driver guilt and vehicle guilt can materialize through wounding. There is a seasonality to this, of course: monsoon season erodes pavement and gravel, thinning out the city's skins, abrading the skin of humans. Rhythms get set up around seasons: the holes appear most grievously in monsoon, and then the municipal government pledges to fix them for the following monsoon, and then the cycle repeats.

Stuckedness itself takes shape unequally. Precisely *whose* bodies are exposed to the violence of mobility is thoroughly a matter of gender and sexuality (Jain, 2006). Confinement and movement cleave along lines of gender, caste, class and kinship, a point elaborated in detail by Shilpa Phadke et al. (2011) and Sareeta Amrute (2015). Amrute explains:

As women of lower caste and class backgrounds find roads to upward class mobility through pink-collar jobs, they simultaneously are increasingly sexualized, not because they are forced to

enter the 'sexually charged' space of the car and the street, but because these very spaces increasingly figure as the borderlands of a respectable middle-class imaginary of consumption taking place behind office park and residential compound walls. (2015: 341)

The holes of the street constrict and open according to multiple parameters of social structure. The fact that Asif and Nasir are both young men is hardly incidental, nor is the fact that most of the motorcycle accidents in the trauma ward occur among young men. It is also notable that when women are in the trauma ward due to motorcycle accidents, they are usually cases of pillion riders (Mumbai's laws do not require pillion riders to wear helmets). Exposure to mobility and its entailments can mean opportunity and it can mean vulnerability; both forms are always in relation to different concentrations of social value and materialize one aspect of gender's embodiment.

The same week as Asif's admission to the trauma ward, there is news of a motorcyclist who has died because of a pothole. The motorbike driver was a doctor who coached chess for kids in his free time. He was travelling to pick up some trophies for a competition, attempted to avoid a pothole by swerving, and was hit by a truck moments after. A Marathi newspaper describes the street as rough and uneven (*khaadbadi*). The pillion rider described the bits he remembered of the incident. The doctor 'spotted a large pothole in our way at the last minute and slightly lost control over the vehicle. Just then, the tempo [truck] hit us from behind. I don't remember what happened after that.' A news anchor covering the story rued that 'another life is lost to killer potholes' (Times of India, 2017). (No word on the truck.) The anchor called the accident a case of 'civic negligence,' raising again the common concern of many in this city, even amidst media hype: How is it that the city is a form of livelihood, yet also a form of death? Here, 'the civic' is not so much a duty but a form of deadly neglect: the commons that kills.⁷ The locations of killer gaps tell their own story about how injuries reflect capital flows, particularly tectonic shifts in real estate markets that take shape in and between neighbourhoods (Appadurai, 2000; Bhan, 2009; Doshi, 2013; Finkelstein, 2019; Rao et al., 2007; Searle, 2016).

As holes materialize infrastructures, bodies in holes materialise both neglect and profit. Anthropologist Filip de Boeck elaborates this idea at length based on research in Kinshasa, where the material-theoretical concept of a hole organizes social formation and deformation. Potholes are a key example. 'Postcolonial urban living in Congo literally means living with potholes as generic urban infrastructures,' he writes (2016: 13).⁸ Potholes are a matter of possibility, something generative. I agree with de Boeck on the generativity of potholes, and that they are scenes of instruction. As potholes generate death and injury, publics emerge through life's erosion. Although people in Mumbai do not necessarily cast the city as a giant hole, the way that de Boeck suggests that residents of Kinshasa do, the hole is a more a semio-material figure of neglect. As the following section describes, whether they are rendered comedic, or anchored in the putatively flat reason of a 'citizen audit,' holes point to a kind of negligence that perhaps someone will respond to.

City songs

The video is a music video, although not one of any established band. It is a group of people who work at Red FM, one of the city's most popular radio stations. The camera centres on a woman well known to Mumbaikars, the radio jockey (RJ) named Malishka Mendonsa.

Mendonsa begins singing, with the group following behind her in chorus. She addresses the city itself, and its relationship to potholes. The song works through the register of trust (*bharosa*) – or, more precisely, lack thereof – in the city’s governing body: the BMC. The first line, and the structure of the refrain, affirm that the city does not trust the municipal authorities. This is especially pronounced during monsoon season when infrastructure collapses. It is an urban anthem, one that voices the common man’s mistrust of governance, pitted like the potholes in the roads, round and full as the pothole’s own shape. It was posted in July 2017; in the six months that followed, it had over 22 million views on YouTube. The song, sung in Marathi, is a play on a Marathi folk song that works similarly through rhyme and reduplication of words (the original song is called *Sonu, Tuzha Mazhavar Bharosa Nahin Kay*, [Sonu, Don’t You Trust Me]).

In the song, Mendonsa is the siren, with the city speaking to and through her. The first two stanzas sketch out the antics (*jhol*) around potholes:

Mumbai, tula BMC var bharosa nahin kay
 Mumbai, don’t you trust the BMC
Mumbai cha rasta madhye jhol jhol
 There are antics on Mumbai’s roads
Rastyanche khade kase khol khol
 The potholes in the road are deep
Khadyanचा aakar kasa gol gol
 The potholes are round-shaped
Mumbai tu maya sang goad bol
 Mumbai, you speak sweetly to me
Mumbai tula pausa var bharosa nahin kay
 Mumbai, don’t you trust the rains
Mumbai cha traffic kiiti laamb laamb
 Mumbai’s traffic is so long
Traffic madhye aapan jaam jaam
 We’re stuck in traffic jams
Signal cha aakar kasa gol gol
 The traffic signal is round-shaped
Mumbai tu maya sang goad bol
 Mumbai, you speak sweetly to me. (Red FM India, 2017)

The song continues with images of overflowing rains in monsoon season and of delayed local trains. It concludes on notes of exhaustion, of the common man (*manus*) drained by the potholes and the breakdown. This leads to a sense of an overwhelmingness of the city that is not borne out of the shock of crowds but, instead, out of the shock of the seasonal yet seemingly-endless effects of infrastructural attack. The other conclusion is that these holes are evidence. The monsoon washes away the patina of shoddy patchwork on potholes, and materializes municipal corruption. The song marked another moment that followed several acts of pothole publicity via Mendonsa’s radio show. In 2013, she hosted a ‘Pothole Festival’ (*pothole utsav*), inviting listeners to photograph, describe and report potholes on Mumbai’s roads on the radio station’s Facebook page. In turn, Mendonsa went to some of these potholes to do a pothole *puja*, or act of worship, with offerings of flowers and songs to

the pothole. The radio station invited local municipal government officials to join, in part to fold them into a field of accountability.⁹ In the pothole *pujas*, public acts of devotion cluster around the failings of a city (please see Figure 1). In the case of potholes, however, parody is as important a structure and aesthetic as is Hindu devotion. Everyone is in on the joke, including the government officials.

The hole also converges two parties – citizens and their municipal representatives – who are often separated by endless phone calls and written complaints that may or may not get answered. As Jennifer Ashley notes in her ethnography of parody on Chilean television, the transitional effects of parody can form ‘sites for the emergence of new political actors and practices’ (2014: 767). Yet, she notes, too much ethnographic focus on what precedes or follows a parodic transition ‘can allow us to skip too quickly over what is created in the in-between’ (2014: 767). If neglect creates holes, and holes create damage, bodies lie in the middle.

I have thus far detailed how bodies move through holes unexpectedly, but there are deliberate insertions of bodies into potholes too, ones that offer different valences of moving through infrastructure. One in Bangalore, for example, drew attention to the ever-present feature of potholes in the city through performance art. Dressed as a mermaid, she sat in a water-filled pothole and splashed herself as the cameras clicked. Potholes become places to reimagine presence for others as well. Architect Rupali Gupte created a project entitled ‘Pothole City,’ in which she constructed a miniature town inside a pothole (please see Figure 2). For Gupte, the pothole is a sign of urban inhabitation, a sign that people are living through holes. The hole is not necessarily deleterious as people move through it. Demonstrating the possibility that inhabitation could be achieved by moving inside the hole, Gupte offers a rebuke to the authoritative force of urban master plans, a force that Gupte notes emerges ‘from the madness of the city and not from the logic of the grid’ (2011).¹⁰

Acts of publicity around potholes share features with acts of ‘nuisance talk’ (Ghertner, 2015: 80) and imperatives to clean the city in order to expand middle-class access while rooting out the poor (Anjaria, 2016, 2009). While the *pujas* centre on potholes, one cannot overlook the act of ritual itself, one of the critical features of divine spaces in urban South Asia (Benjamin, 2015; Srinivas, 2006; Taneja, 2017). The emphasis on potholes in the songs,



Figure 1. Pothole puja.

the *pujas*, the artistic forms and the performativity of tongue-in-cheek parody each reveal different valences of the pothole where the hole holds life. The hole may be a possibility for remedy, but it has an original violence that lingers, a motion that is not easily sung away.

Grievance portal

Bipin and his motorbike moved into the pothole at the same time. After his body stopped skidding, he lay face down on the road in what he described as ‘excruciating’ pain – ‘it left a chill in my spine,’ he said to me. His crash occurred on his daily college commute, on a major arterial road in the Mumbai suburbs. Bipin returned to his pothole scene a few days to photograph it. Then, he began photographing other potholes on his mobile phone. He rode up and down the length of the arterial road for several kilometres, geocoded each pothole photo with the help of Google Maps, and compiled a report. He is studying journalism in college, and felt this was a chance to put his reporting skills to the test. Bipin filed his report on the city’s online site for municipal complaints (*Aaple Sarkaar*, ‘Your Government’), an e-governance ‘grievance portal’ for the BMC.

Bipin’s report begins with a plea: ‘Hoping for a response soon with actions taken to improve the condition of the roads as soon as possible before someone is left severely injured.’ Each page conveys a pothole picture and an interview Bipin conducted with nearby figures like the chai seller or the newspaper vendor. These people recalled accidents at the given pothole, a string of memories pegged to the pavement’s unevenness. This was the grounds of the evidence of urban neglect. One vendor told Bipin that he took it upon himself to fill the holes in front of his newsstand with extra sand he had from his own home repair work. But the holes kept reappearing; the vendor told Bipin that a pit was created every 15 or 20 days. The news vendor regularly pointed out the holes to the traffic police, he said, but they would affirm that potholes are the municipality’s responsibility, not theirs. The accusation of negligence takes shape, and then bounces.

Sometimes, the complaint can bounce back through the hole. Over a week after filing the report, Bipin received a response that his complaint had been resolved. He returned to the potholes to check. The one he had mentioned in the report where his bike crashed had been



Figure 2. Pothole City.

patched over, but unevenly so. The others had barely been touched, or if there was a touch, it was a touch-up, a patch of gravel or asphalt patted down. ‘People can fall in those,’ he says. A patch is not a fix, and the patch can trip you up. ‘See, the base isn’t proper,’ he explains. ‘They just filled it up’ – and did so often quite partially. Filling in is not the same as fixing. The quick deadlines the city sets for contractors are part of the issue, he thought. For him, the very return to the scene of injury was traumatic. He had a mental picture of ‘the worst’ when he got back to that original hole, a picture in his mind of him lying on the road crouched in pain but maybe not ever to get up again. While the audit may seem like a bureaucratic act of distancing, Bipin affirms that his body still is connected to the hole.

The failure of an appropriate civic response even as he continued to feel the connection to the hole led Bipin to the news media, an outlet many urban Indian (and often middle-class) citizens pursue. A news story ran his account of injury, photographic capture, pothole mapping and the feeble civic response. After a decent run of Facebook posts and retweets and shares of the news story on WhatsApp, Bipin went to the headquarters of the municipality. The Chief of the BMC was not present, so Bipin left his report with the secretary. The ‘refusal of the municipality to listen is costing people their lives,’ he says. The grounds of negligence here is not listening: the hole of silence. The accident reinforces his own expectation of neglect in the form of the holes that the city produces. This affects how he rides now on his motorcycle. ‘I have a mental fear of negligence’ by the city authorities, Bipin claims. ‘You’re so sure that the BMC hasn’t filled in the potholes, so you slow down [your motorcycle], but vehicles may hit you from the back.’ It is not so much the road that he feels; he feels the pain of negligence through the sensation of the pothole. This mobile sense-memory changes the way he drives his motorcycle even now. He slows, purposefully, and lets his pain and anxiety attenuate, even if it means delaying vehicles behind him. For Bipin, holes have phenomenological effects; the embodiment of infrastructure constitutes traffic.

I took this embodiment of infrastructure – the ways that Bipin still *feels* the accident even as he attempts to keep moving – as inextricable from his demands to civic authorities. The photos of the potholes were accounts of holes that could potentially trap another body, and cause more injury. Bipin was aware that filing a report online might have to go unanswered. He was aware of his position as a ‘compliant consumer-citizen,’ to use a term for the subject position offered by William Mazzarella in an essay about the politics of e-governance in India (2006). Mazzarella notes that in India, long rued for its corruption, the possibilities offered by e-governance platforms defy easy categorizations of care or neglect.

It is in this uncategorizable zone that Bipin continues to feel his injury without a sense of resolution. Bipin untangles himself from the hole in the road, only to find himself stuck in the grievance portal. He believes that it would likely take the death of someone far more socially high-profile before anything significant might be done by the authorities. ‘They wait for a major incident to occur, only if a celebrity or politician dies,’ he says. Then the hole might get filled, properly. Official responses to moving through infrastructure can be selective: until an injured gets invested with social value, the city would continue to operate on a repeating cycle of accident, complaint and refill.¹¹

Bipin takes particular pride in his report not only for its close attention to geocoded detail, but for his photographs of the holes. The science of it all, the precision, comes from the frames he shot that placed the holes in context. A Google Maps coordinate was certainly specific, but knowing that a pothole appeared in front of a specific tea stall or storefront made it just as real. His photos are multi-scaled in the report: Some are close-ups of the edges of holes, at their level, a hole’s-eye view of things. Others are taken from the

perspective of a motorcyclist, with the camera angled several feet above the street at a downward angle. I mention that he has a knack for photography.

He brings out his phone to show me his favourite photograph so far. He photographed a bus stuck in the water, in the heavy rainfall of September 2017, the same day that the doctor fell down the manhole. Bipin saw a bus get stuck inside an underpass tunnel, as the waters rose. He went closer, even though people nearby warned him to stay back. But he was concerned that people were stuck in the bus, so he waded through the water. The monsoon season features heroic moments like this, moments when people make efforts at rescue that later get called ‘Mumbai’s spirit’ in a refrain of resilience, another story that the city tells itself.

‘Were you alone?’ I ask. No, he says, a friend was with him. But the friend would only go so far, and after a point, Bipin was alone in his attempt to free anyone stuck in the bus.

‘But why were you alone? Why did the friend not join you?’

‘He was afraid of getting sucked into a hole.’

Conclusion: The hole of neglect

In his classic text *Rhythmanalysis*, Henri Lefebvre writes of bodily rhythms that he calls ‘becoming irregular’ (*dérèglement*). The rhythm of irregularity

produces antagonistic effects. . . it throws out of order and disrupts; it is symptomatic of a disruption that is generally profound, lesional and no longer functional. It can also produce a lacuna, a hole in time, to be filled in by an invention, a creation. That only happens, individually or socially, by passing through a crisis. (2004: 44)

In this article, I have described holes as the constitution of crisis I have focused on the bodies that move through holes to argue for closer attention to embodied movements and material traces of body–environment interfaces.

To reframe Lefebvre’s claim, I would also add that holes are indeed quite functional. Wounding constitutes infrastructure; forms of disruption and mutation – in Lefebvre’s terms, ‘becoming irregular’ – are normative rather than exceptional features of infrastructure and urban life. Even as bodies and environments blur, there are material traces of this process. I have suggested that holes reveal these features, which further point to lapses in law, governance and civic attention.¹² These complexities are rendered through movement and distribute unevenly. In Mumbai’s potholes, there is much that proliferates even as life degrades. Wound culture is integral to contemporary Indian sociality; this article has explored holes as a site integrating movement, flesh, environment and life. Bodies moving through holes make infrastructure biopolitical.

While I have focused on the problems of the *presence* of holes for bodies, I wish to conclude on a note about the equally problematic *absence* of holes. A portal to a different place, a door to escape, is often desperately needed but suddenly missing. There was no outlet at the end of the railway crossing bridge at Elphinstone Station in Mumbai, where a stampede killed at least 20 people in September 2017. People suffocated as a rush to find a portal of outlet ensued. Months later, a fire broke out at a snack (*namkeen, farsan*) factory, killing at least 12. Several months after that, fire consumed a higher-end restaurant in the city’s mill area, killing at least 14 people, most of whom died not due to burns but due to asphyxiation because of the lack of proper fire exits (Naik, 2018). This incident provoked a series of high-profile inquiries and demands for fire safety. Perhaps, many of my

interlocutors speculated, the media attention was because those killed were from families with far higher socioeconomic profiles than the migrant workers killed in the snack factory fire. Precisely who encounters holes, and who does not, is a power difference the potentiality of promised action and the cessation of perceived neglect. Geographer Ananya Roy invites scholars to conceive of the urban as a question: How do people encounter ‘a particular way of being governmental’ (2016)? I have suggested that being governmental depends partly on how bodies move through infrastructures. At stake are the circumstances of moving through holes: their shape, their potential to damage, and their politics of embodied movements, however, fleeting.

I am in a taxi again. As usual, the car bumps along the road. The RJ Malishka chatters on the car’s radio. It is not monsoon season yet, but meteorologists have predicted aberrant rain showers. ‘Are we prepared for the rains?’ Malishka asks listeners – in this case, the driver and me. She continues: ‘And are we ready for potholes? Ninety-foot deep potholes?’ I ask the driver about potholes. They are like the clouds, he says, pointing to the grey sky. They come and go, these clouds of the road, feathery from afar, jagged up close.

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Notes

1. It is notable that Doshi (2017: 125) begins her propositions for an embodied urban ecology with the case of Kalpana Pimpale, a woman in Mumbai who fell to her death in 2015 through a multi-storey toilet. Doshi insightfully situates Pimpale’s death in the context of development ambitions of urban cleansing (*Swachh Bharat*, ‘Clean India’), and clarifies the important fact that the violence of embodied ecologies shows the uneven gender distribution of death and injury. I would simply add that the *mechanism* here is one of absence materialized as a collapsed floor: a hole in a structure.

2. Also see Hansen and Verkaiik (2009). On the wound as the split between value-generating social forms under capitalism, see Gidwani (2008).
3. In this regard, discussions about deaths in the city from infrastructural holes might be usefully put into conversation with Redfield's notion of 'minimal biopolitics' (2013: 18) and Stevenson's discussion of care at a distance (2014: 87).
4. This particular feature of corruption in Mumbai, called 'the road scam,' has a complex history that is beyond my scope of analysis here because it has taken shape as a set of multiple, district court cases.
5. See Nelson (2015) for more on the ways that counting inflects living and dying.
6. This is a pseudonym. The cases in this article that are not based in interviews are labelled with actual names.
7. On the ambivalence of the commons, see Berlant (2016).
8. De Boeck contrasts his use of 'hollow' here with that of Weizman (2012); the hollowness of Kinshasa 'should be understood in a much more immediate' way, de Boeck notes (2016: 16).
9. Pothole *pujas* also occurred in Bangalore.
10. Technology firms have also found potential in potholes. An app called Spothole by a Mumbai-based software developer group offers users the ability to take photos and geo-locate potholes (Fill in the Potholes Project, 2014).
11. In February 2018, the Bombay High Court asked the BMC to develop a 'portal' online specifically for reporting potholes.
12. My definition of 'lapse' here derives from Stein's use of the term in her ethnography of media and occupation in Israel. Lapses point us to 'the faltering processes and breakdowns rooted in conjoined human and mechanical acts,' she explains (2017: S57). Lapses are both gaps and signs that progressive technological promises are not working.

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