



Climate crisis: When comfort masquerades as immunity



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Almost every historical crisis has produced its version of the same thought: that what is happening is happening to someone else. In times of plague, those with better houses and cleaner air believed the arrangement of their lives protected them, until the plague climbed the stairs. In times of famine, those with granaries assumed the hunger would stay at the gate, until the gate became the problem. The ego, that false sense of "I" which has built itself from a body, a position, and the externalities accumulated around both, manufactures this thought not out of malice but as the expression of its most funda-

mental operation: the construction of a self that stands apart from its predicament.

The climate crisis has produced a version of this thought particularly well suited to the Indian urban professional class. It runs approximately as follows: climate change is real, regrettable, perhaps urgent, but its primary victims are the farmer without irrigation, the construction worker without shade, or the landless labourer whose livelihood is written entirely on the weather. These are people exposed in ways the urban professional is not. She has the air-conditioning, the subscription delivery service, the cab that comes to the door; in short, a cushion of affluence between herself and the conditions that devastate those who cannot purchase that cushion. The crisis is real; it is simply not hers.

The flaw in this reasoning is physiological, infrastructural, economic, and biological, and the evidence for it is not projected but already distributed through the middle class's own daily life. India has entered a heat season that scientists are describing in terms that would have seemed excessive a decade ago. Delhi's drainage infrastructure dates from 1976, when the city held six million people and the system was designed to handle 25 millimetres of rainfall per hour; the city now regularly receives more than double that in a single hour. The crisis the middle class has assigned to someone else is visible in the city's own property markets, its own seasonal calendar, its own streets after an hour of rain, and the exemption the middle class believes it holds has already been declined, though its holders have not yet checked the correspondence.

The air conditioner is one of the middle class's primary counter-arguments to the climate crisis: that affluence can purchase a private atmosphere, a set point of 23 degrees at which whatever happens outside becomes irrelevant. This is the ego's preferred relationship to shared consequence, the belief that what one has assembled around oneself constitutes a genuine separation from what one has produced.

The human body has exactly one mechanism for shedding internally generated heat: sweating, and the evaporation of sweat. Metabolism produces heat continuously; the body is, in thermal terms, an inefficient machine that generates more heat than work from everything it consumes. When humidity is high,



sweat cannot evaporate, the skin cannot cool, and the body's core temperature rises until the organs most sensitive to heat, the brain foremost among them, begin to fail, and the failure is sudden rather than gradual. A healthy person sitting in the shade with unlimited water will lose consciousness and die when the wet-bulb temperature reaches 35 degrees, solely because the body's only heat-removal mechanism has been rendered inoperative by the moisture content of the surrounding air.

The air conditioner addresses this, as long as several simultaneous conditions hold: there is electricity, the unit is functioning within its operating range, the person is indoors, and the grid can carry the aggregate load of every unit in the city running at once during a heat emergency. When heat is severe enough to require cooling, every unit runs simultaneously, and the grid carries a load it was not designed to sustain.

Before the grid fails, the apartment must be exited anyway, because the apartment runs on labour from outside it. The domestic worker arrives each morning from a neighbourhood where power cuts run twelve to fifteen hours a day and the roof is tin, which turns a small room into an oven before noon. The delivery worker completing forty rides before noon, whose dark T-shirt shows a white outline of salt from what his body has spent in the heat, cannot be replaced by a platform algorithm that also operates in the same heat. The middle class's comfort is downstream of all of these labour chains, and when those chains degrade, the comfort degrades with them.

Through the winter months, air quality sits at AQI levels above 400, producing the metallic taste and sustained coughing that anyone who has spent a winter in Delhi recognises without being told. Come July, waterlogging closes parks, courts and outdoor spaces, while the standing water breeds dengue and chikungunya, diseases that the middle class contract alongside everyone else, with the same fevers, the same falling platelet counts, and the same hospital queues. A farmer in Uttar Pradesh reported this season that wheat grains are thinner and the harvest lighter than in previous years. The body receiving this food is itself not exempt from the atmospheric pressure it has been arranged to ignore. The human organism, in the most precise biological sense, is not a single entity: more than half the cells within a human body are microbial, belonging to communities of bacteria and fungi that govern digestion, immune response, and aspects of neurological function. When ambient conditions shift systematically across years and decades, those communities shift with them. The body that walks out of the air-conditioned apartment a decade from now carries a different internal biological arrangement from the one that walked out today, regardless of what the thermostat reads.

The exemption the middle class has arranged covers the ambient temperature of one room. It does not cover the food arriving in that room, the labour sustaining the supply chain, the grid powering the cooling, the social fabric outside the entrance, the rivers that will not always run, the soil producing the staples, or the body inhabiting the room and the microbiome the body is. The ego that wrote this exemption wrote it in a language the climate system has never learned.

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