On Urban Photography:
Infrastructure in a Minor Key

Maan Barua

When walking down a crowded *galli* in Old Delhi, the pedestrian negotiates rickshaws, cattle, bicycles and crowds. Yet this cramped space has an order. People walk with purpose. A pause means exchanging greetings with someone familiar. Those hanging out in the alleyway or outside shops are waiting... for something to happen, for a deal to materialize, or with no fixed intent. In the midst of the bustle, you hear someone shout "Hai!". Your gaze tilts upwards to see a macaque clambering up a pipe, then onto a balcony, before crossing the busy street via electric cables proliferating in every direction. At this moment another city comes into view, an arboreal city where space expands via other-than-human propensities and where movement is freed from the usual conduits of mobility.

What if this image were a frame of reference for urban inquiry? Would it tell us something different about the material politics of infrastructure than what is evident in more established accounts (Larkin 2013)? This image, I argue, prompts thinking about urban infrastructure in a minor key – in a manner attentive to stories that are not necessarily tethered to a human constant or fall back upon the usual questions of planning, design and assembly. The minor is a language of rearrangement and variation. It takes urban worlds in a direction different to those dictated by an established canon (Deleuze and Guattari 1986a). And it is these variations that make the minor political, for it indexes other ways of negotiating access to infrastructure (Barua 2023; for minor accounts of cities, also see: Sundaram 2010, Niranjana 2022).

Inventing Lines. Macaques forging new urban pathways as they move using electricity cables.
Photo: Maan Barua, 2020.

Let us return to the photograph. What I aimed to hold within frame, using my mobile phone camera, was the animal's mobility and the tangle of wires – abstract lines that curve in different directions, knot into one another, only to unfurl in new ways. Using a mobile phone, rather than a professional camera, was an attempt to work with a device that increasingly mediates urban experiences, including those of my interlocutors. Through the optic so generated, the city becomes "a confusion of cables" (Flusser 2005: 326), where the ambit of one set of infrastructures is overtaken by improvisational assembly. The electrification of Delhi has in fact proceeded through a complex intersection of state ritual, political action and legal struggles (Coleman 2017). The proliferation of wires – raveling here, unraveling there – is the outcome of practices of hooking onto the energy grid via improvised, and sometimes unauthorized, connections. This has been partly spurred by a rapid spread in unplanned settlements and, concomitantly, an increased demand for energy. The formalization of such connections has been one process through which electrification has proceeded in the city (Criqui 2016).

A Meshwork of Wires.
Hooking onto the grid via
improvised connections.
Photo: Maan Barua, 2020.

Informal urbanism, however, does not attend to all of the currents this image brings to life. The electricity grid becomes a meshwork of wires through specific material practices of urban electricians. The latter graft wires onto existing connections in order to reroute electricity. In contrast to an engineer, who works with designs, plans and the laws of voltage, capacity and load, the electrician is a bricoleur, operating through rules of thumb, rearranging wires in new and varying configurations. Their practices enact a minor politics, for they seek to evade scrutiny rather than openly contest capital and the state. "Completely stopping [such] theft," a Delhi policeman remarks, "is not practically feasible." Exact connections are difficult to ascertain during a raid. Local strongmen might intervene and hinder officials from carrying out inspections.

At the same time, the proliferation of wires creates opportunities for macaques to negotiate the city. These animals are predominantly ground-dwelling but, in cities, will move using cables, walls and rooftops. By repurposing such infrastructure, macaques have shifted from a rural terrestriality to an urban arboreality (Barua and Sinha 2022). Crossing roads via electric wires, however, is a variegated form of macaque mobility. Certain bold individuals, especially adult males, might be more disposed to doing so than juveniles or females with infants. The silhouette of the animal draws attention to a "haptic space" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986b: 492), forged through macaques' tactile, and not just visual, encounters with the grid. The photograph below indexes how infrastructure furnishes habitat for the animals. Wires and cables allow macaques to climb onto balconies or sneak into houses to search for food – a commonplace occurrence in the city, which leads to considerable frictions with people. Dubbed Delhi's "monkey menace" (Malik 2001: 169), the government has to date caught and relocated over twenty thousand macaques from the metropolis in the last fifteen years (Rajput 2018). Yet, efforts to create a macaque-free city have reached an impasse.

Macaques repurposing infrastructures to disruptive effect is only part of the story. They can also be enrolled by urban citizens to make claims on infrastructure. Several households in one of Delhi's lower-middle-class residential colonies resorted to abandoning the new electricity meters that a power distribution company had installed. Macaques, residents argued, had developed a habit of ripping off meters attached to the wall. When complaints were put forward to the police, the latter remarked that "theft laws are for humans, not macaques." The local power-supply entity apparently replaced more than fifty damaged or missing meters. Whilst it is difficult to ascertain whether macaques were the true cause in each instance – for it is plausible that people had surreptitiously removed them and deflected the blame onto the animals – there is no doubt that this represents subversions enacted by bringing other-than-humans into the fray. Here is a politics of infrastructural access in a minor key, for it involves acts of trying to evade regulation, albeit outside of what usually passes as political activity.

The enmeshments between other-than-humans and urban infrastructure are revealed by the photograph, partly because of the phone's limited capacity for zooming-in, forcing one to depict an animal in its surrounds. Such enmeshments are often taken to be epiphenomena in much urban theory. They are treated as subjects that reside within the city, but which are not really worthy of serious enquiry. Animals are seen as transgressive forces that disrupt the workings of infrastructure, but not necessarily as agents that constitute part of the material politics of infrastructural maintenance and repair (Bondt and Jaffe 2022). In one of the close-ups above is a transformer, towards which the macaque seems to be moving. This was not a deliberate part of the frame: rather the transformer became evident only after having taken the photograph. Nonetheless, the transformer also allows for extending this story of the urban in a minor key. In Delhi, there have been several cases of macaques tripping power lines and transformers. During such instances, members of a macaque's natal troop can prevent repair personnel from removing the injured or electrocuted animal, causing further delays to the restoration of electricity. Nowadays, power suppliers have begun to collaborate with conservation and animal welfare NGOs, who provide assistance when repair personnel are at work (Anon. 2018). Such developments show how animal–infrastructure enmeshments are being recognized in practice and have implications for infrastructural maintenance and repair in the lived city.

← *Transformer. Practitioners are aware of animal–infrastructure enmeshments for they have bearings on the maintenance and repair of the electricity grid.* Photo: Maan Barua, 2020.

→ *Haptic space. Tactile encounters with the electricity grid alter the cartography of the city.* Photo: Maan Barua, 2020.

Taken using a mobile phone, this photograph was produced under particular circumstances: while walking down a crowded *galli*, hearing someone shout "*Hai!*", knowing that this could be the movement of a macaque and anticipating where it might go. The gaze tilts upwards, shifting the field of vision from a congested street, edited out by the camera frame, to the buildings with wires dangling overhead. One could say it was the macaque that led the photographer there, to an arboreal plane not always discernible when vision is fixed on the street.

But this shift in gaze does more. It helps forge another set of analytics that excavate a complex suite of agents, entities and forces engaged in the material politics of infrastructure. Such a politics of infrastructure needs to be articulated in a minor key, for what counts as political is not easily graspable through more established orders of thought and method. Furthermore, much of what is illuminated often operates under thresholds of detectability. A minor account of infrastructure might not entail grand explanatory schemas one associates with the urban canon. Yet, it is vital for comprehending the flexible strategies that render infrastructures accessible and which make the city habitable.

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