

# Scents of care: Multispecies relations in Pakistan's heatwave

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## Abstract

This article examines how odour, intensified by heat, shapes the sensory aspects of social and multispecies relations in Pakistan. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Kasur's tanneries and Lahore's animal shelters during a period of record-breaking heat, it analyses how smell structures inclusion and exclusion, mediates encounters with humans and animals, and opens alternative modes of ethnographic engagement. While sensory anthropology has long highlighted the sociocultural significance of olfaction through concepts such as 'aromascapes' and the 'anthropology of sensation', this article foregrounds odour as both an analytic and a praxis. By tracing how activists, workers, animals, and the ethnographer inhabit dense scentscapes, it shows that the intersection of extreme heat and malodour reveals new understanding of relationality, care, and labour.

## KEYWORDS

caste hierarchies, heat, multispecies relations, odour, sensory ethnography

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The city of Kasur was unexpectedly lifeless on that hot July day in 2024. I was accompanied by Ali Bhai, a lifelong resident of the city in his early fifties, whom I had known for a decade through

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a mutual acquaintance. Although he was born and raised in Kasur, even he found it unbearable to remain under the merciless sun that day. Only 2 years earlier, catastrophic floods had swept across much of Pakistan; now, despite intermittent monsoon rains, extreme temperatures were breaking records and had already claimed nearly 600 lives. These environmental shifts have disproportionately affected small industries, especially those dependent on fresh water, such as Kasur's renowned tanneries. I had contacted Ali to help me reach these small tanneries in this 'leather city of Pakistan' and to trace the processing of donkey hides prior to their export to China, where they become a key ingredient in a popular traditional medicine, *ejiao*. Yet the oppressive heat forced us to pause our journey at the *dawa khana* of one of Ali's friends, a small drugstore in inner Kasur, where I was greeted with a locally prepared *sharbat-e-sandal*, a sweet sandalwood drink.

The glass stood on a flowery dish, with ice cubes floating in this rich yellowish-gold liquid. I took the first sip. Fabulous! It was not just a respite from the intense heat but also presented an enchanting woody aroma, an earthy and distinctive fragrance that one finds near the local attar sellers outside the Jamia Masjid, a subtle calm evoked in Wasi Shah's Urdu poetry (*mjhy sandal kar do*—'make me sandal'), and a soothing nostalgia associated with playing as a child near the burning incense before visiting the graveyard in the Islamic month of Muharram. Another gulp and it was gone.

The *sharbat-e-sandal* did not quench my thirst, but it did cement a sense of conviviality between me, Ali, and his friend. It transformed the moment into a shared sensory experience, opening possibilities for an ethnographic engagement grounded in what Howes (2019, p. 19) describes as 'participant sensation' rather than conventional 'participant observation'. The refreshing taste of sandalwood in such intense heat bridged multiple social distances, drawing both researcher and interlocutor into a subtle circle of acceptance, approval, and embrace.

In this essay, I examine the role of olfaction amid escalating climate extremes and environmental uncertainty in Pakistan. My aim is twofold: first, to show how sensory experience underpins relations of inclusion and exclusion; and second, to foreground sensation as a mode of ethnographic method. While the tasty drink revealed local ethics of welcome and care in the oppressive heat, it was smell that most forcefully articulated boundaries of belonging and distance. Since 2023, as I embarked on a research project on the use of donkey skins in traditional medicine, my fieldwork in Kasur and Lahore, two Punjabi cities approximately 55 kilometres apart, revealed the critical role of odour in shaping how people relate to Others. In Kasur, I aimed to trace the afterlives of donkey hides and expected to meet Chinese exporters who, according to my animal activist friends in Lahore, had leased several traditional tanneries for processing skins before exporting them to China. Yet as Ali and I ventured deeper into the old *mohalla*, with its hundreds of active tanneries, I did not encounter a single Chinese exporter. What I found instead was the overwhelming *badbu*, the stench of hundreds of raw hides, piled over each other, soaked in acid, straightened, and dyed. This raw leather smell, intensified by heat, humidity, sweat, and chemical runoff, formed a pungent *nagwar-bu* capable of making anyone sick. And yet leather workers, seemingly indifferent to the odour, laboured relentlessly in singlets and loincloths—skins treating skins.

The scentscapes of Kasur's tanneries resonated unexpectedly with overcrowded animal shelters in Lahore, where I also conducted research. Both spaces bore the mingling smell of animals, dead and alive, and of the labour of tending to bodies and skins, a labour that only intensified as temperatures rose. These dense odours enabled some individuals to inhabit and cultivate intimate relations with animal bodies, while for others the malodorous atmosphere heightened a culturally shared aversion (*karahat*) to such sites and to the people who worked within them.

As with Kasur's tanneries, long relegated to older neighbourhoods away from central bazaars, most Lahore shelters were similarly pushed to the city's peripheries, kept outside the public's preferred olfactory radius. Yet it was precisely within these liminal, *dis-odourly* spaces that the ethnographic potential of smell became pronounced. Odour opened avenues for connection with interlocutors and offered insight into the cultural, social, and political relations embedded in the everyday work of handling animals and their remains. Immersion in these sensory environments illuminated how care, labour, and relatedness traverse species boundaries and intersect with social hierarchies (Figure 1).

I build on such scentscapes in this article, and by examining how living and working with odour can open rich avenues for connections, I situate this research within the growing scholarship of sensory anthropology. Over recent decades, such studies have increasingly acknowledged the importance of the olfactory sense, particularly through concepts such as 'aromascapes' and the 'anthropology of sensation', to study sociability, rituals, and environmental care. More specifically, in *Aroma* (1994), Classen et al. build on extensive cases on the social and symbolic potential of odour in many cultures, examining how smell shapes everyday politics, hierarchies, and social structures while concurrently affecting power structures and social divides within societies. More recently, Nicola Di Stefano and Maria Teresa Russo, in their edited collection *Olfaction* (2022), bring insights from philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and anthropology to examine interdisciplinary intersection on odour's capacity to connect body, self, and politics. Building on such discussions, and engaging with more-than-human scents, I argue that attentive sensory immersion allows us to understand how bodies, affects, and spaces are ordered through culturally ingrained hierarchies in Pakistan (Butt, 2023; Kapoor, 2022), while also positioning smell itself as an ethnographic method.

As philosopher and artist Laura Marks (2002, p. 114) writes, smell 'asks to be sensed in its particularity, in an engagement between two bodies, chemical and human'. I show that smell's chemical capacities, its ability to exceed the human, are intimately entangled with surrounding ecologies and climatic conditions. Oppressive heat and sweating bodies generate new scents or



FIGURE 1 "Skins treating skins: Labourers busy removing hair from raw animal hides in Kasur".



intensify existing ones, rendering the environment to actively reinforce exclusion and cultivate familiarity through the mingling odours of animals and humans, including the ethnographer. This intersection is central to my analysis, opening multiple possibilities, including the capacity to draw on my own sensory experiences to connect more deeply with interlocutors and to engage with their everyday lifeworlds amidst global warming.

## 2 | THE AFFECTIVE FORCE OF ODOUR

A multispecies approach to odour is crucial because smell, often described as a 'wild' sense, draws humans into the domain of animality through the very act of sniffing. Unlike vision, the privileged sense in ethnographic research (Stoller, 1997), olfaction structures visceral forms of connection, enabling people to perceive and think with the body. Recent works in multispecies anthropology show that close attention to olfactory assemblages offers a productive entry point into the perceptions, emotions, and values that underpin ethics of more-than-human care. For instance, as Govindrajan demonstrates in *Animal Intimacies* (2018, p. 84), the smell of dung produced by the local Pahari cow in Uttarakhand, India, evokes cherished memories and facilitates interspecies bonds. Local cow dung is considered more appropriate for Hindu ritual practices than the pungent dung of the imported Jersey breed because the local cow's scent signifies authenticity, purity, and ritual intimacy; when burned as a dried pat, it sustains relationships not only with deities but also with the mother cow. The maternal dimensions of olfaction are likewise emphasised in Chao's work on the sago palm groves of West Papua, which are closely associated with women as nurturing, life-giving figures. As sago ferments and releases lactic acid, it produces what Indigenous Marind describe as a smell 'like the breastmilk of women who have undertaken vigorous physical exercise' (Chao, 2022, pp. 125–126). This scent reiterates interspecies entanglement amid the ecological devastation wrought by oil-palm expansion, a process intertwined with state-led imperialism, ethnic domination, and capitalist extraction. Across the environmental humanities, odour continues to shape interpretations of more-than-human lifeworlds. Whether through snails' sensory engagements with the world via their tentacular capacity to smell (Van Dooren, 2022, p. 33), the musky aroma of orangutans that mediates relations between volunteers and rehabilitating apes in Borneo (Parreñas, 2018, pp. 71–72), the incense smoke that orients human interactions with jinns and otherworldly beings at Delhi's Firoz Shah Kotla (Taneja, 2018, p. 21), or even the stench of waste that structures human-microbe relations (Doron, 2021, pp. 30–33), odour emerges as a generative analytic for exploring multispecies intimacy, ethical relation, and the sensory textures of shared worlds.

Consider, for example, the case of the matsutake mushroom in Japan, which Tsing interprets as an 'autumn aroma' through historical poems and oral accounts. As Tsing (2015, p. 2) argues, matsutake possesses a distinctive fragrance that 'evokes sadness in the loss of summer's easy riches, but it also calls up the sharp intensity and heightened sensibilities of autumn'. This evocation of smell invites readers to attune to the affective registers of care and labour, longing and memory, and the cherished forms of resistance to modernisation that emerge through multisensory, interspecies entanglements. She continues by explaining:

It's not an easy smell. It's not like a flower or a mouth-watering food. It's disturbing. Many people never learn to love it. It's hard to describe. Some people liken it to



rotting things and some to clear beauty—the autumn aroma. At my first whiff, I was just ... astonished

(2013, p. 14).

The smell of matsutake draws Tsing into a realm of multispecies relatedness, nostalgia, and memory, situating her within the entangled threads of belonging and connection. Olfaction becomes a methodological guide, leading her to seek out stories of cooking and sharing, of moments of happiness and sensory delight, and, ultimately, of temporal rupture and ecological degradation.

Building on these discussions, my analysis examines the methodological potential of odour, particularly when considered alongside heat in an era of climatic crisis, and explores how this nexus of environment and sensorium shapes values of situated care, multispecies connection, and practices of resistance, labour, inclusion, and everyday work. Odour becomes a key site of inquiry because, as in the examples above, emic interpretations of smell often differ sharply from outsider readings. What may register to outsiders as the ‘disturbing’ scent of matsutake or the repulsive smell of curing animal hides is, for those embedded in these practices, part of a sensory landscape through which relations are made. These encounters transform the mushroom into ‘the autumn aroma’, and the discarded animal hide into a revived leather product that, after labour and care, may come to smell good.

A similar dynamic was evident in Lahore’s animal shelters, where the odours of animals and the bodies that cared for them elicited ‘ghin’ or ‘karhiyat’ (disgust) from others, reinforcing entrenched forms of social exclusion. The work was deemed disgusting not only because it required contact with culturally and religiously impure animal bodies, but also because it was thought to imprint a ‘wild’, animal smell onto the human body. As Waqas Butt (2023, pp. 170–171) shows in his analysis of Lahore’s waste infrastructures, disgust does not operate in a vacuum; it is a ‘visceral reaction of repulsion and mental discomfort’ through which social hierarchies are re-instated. The centrality of disgust, he suggests, helps maintain caste and religious stratifications in Pakistan, particularly when the (upper-caste) self recoils from the odour of the (lower-caste) other.

In the following section, I extend this argument by foregrounding the more-than-human and environmental dimensions of odour in the reproduction of relations and hierarchies. Through close engagement with labouring, sweaty bodies, I show how practices of exclusion, as well as possibilities for care, are intensified through intimate engagements with ‘impure’ animals. A focus on smell, I argue, offers not only an analytic window onto these dynamics but also a methodological tool for relating across sensory, social, and species boundaries.

### 3 | EXCLUSIONS, HIERARCHIES AND THE SMELLSCAPE OF LAHORE’S ANIMAL SHELTERS

Before travelling to Kasur, I spent much of my time at various animal shelters in Lahore. One such shelter was located on Bedian Road, on the outskirts of the city near the heavily militarised India-Pakistan border. Operating out of a rented farmhouse, the shelter was managed by the animal-welfare wing of a non-profit organisation (NGO) originally founded to provide disaster relief after the devastating 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan. Over time, the NGO expanded its mandate to include a wide range of initiatives, including health relief, youth community services, women’s empowerment, and animal welfare.



There, I met Mona Khan, a dedicated animal activist from an upper-middle-class family in Lahore who regularly volunteered at the NGO shelter, travelling nearly 50 kilometres from her home each day. For 15 years, she had committed herself to rescuing injured and homeless animals, an ethic of care she said she ‘inherited’ from her parents. Yet despite her tireless efforts, Mona had come to the difficult realisation that she could assist only a small fraction of the animals in need. Nearly a thousand animals lived within the shelter’s four-acre compound. Although the facility protected them from the harsh conditions they would otherwise face outside, their sheer numbers meant the shelter was over capacity. The kennels were full, and the air was often thick with a musky scent that became almost overwhelming during the sweltering days of intense heat and humidity. On my first visit, the earthy odours, damp fur warmed by the sun, the dry, husky smell wafting from the kennels, the bodily oils released by animals confined in close proximity, and the occasional sharp notes of antiseptic, conveyed the precarious state of animal welfare in Pakistan. Mona was acutely aware of these conditions. ‘We cannot trap 900 or 1,000 animals in a shelter; we are basically abusing them’, she insisted, emphasising that she was simultaneously working to make a broader impact. ‘This is why I initiated an advocacy group, hoping to help as many animals as I can’. She brought together a diverse collective of animal activists, lawyers, and doctors to advance this cause. The advocacy group soon began filing legal cases against pet markets, housing societies, and even the Punjab Government, challenging the state’s failure to revise its outdated 1890s animal welfare legislation—remnants of the colonial era. Mona suggested that this legal neglect had contributed to rising levels of animal abuse in Lahore and its surrounding areas. Her persistence yielded results. In 2021, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), the only state body dedicated to improving the lives of working equines, despite its limited resources, invited Mona to serve as an advisor (Figure 2).

Dressed in a long red kurta and maroon chappals, Mona moved tirelessly through the shelter, checking on the wellbeing of the dogs, donkeys, and camels in her care, meeting visitors, and directing the full-time caretakers. Her workload grew heavier as the heat intensified, deepening her empathy for the animals who endured the oppressive conditions with little more than a few ceiling fans for relief. ‘Many people in Lahore prefer to adopt purebred dogs because they see them as status symbols’, Mona remarked with a sneer as we sat in her small, windowless cement office. ‘They associate local breeds with filth and uncleanness (*gandagi*)’. Six local (*desi*) dogs sat around us, awaiting adoption after recovering from various injuries. A small but noisy battery-operated air cooler hummed nearby, circulating the warm air with little effect. The suffocating humidity, amplified by the surrounding rice fields, was compounded by frequent and unscheduled power outages. Like many shelters, CDES relied on low-voltage battery-powered fans that barely alleviated the heat or dried the sweat. Yet this shared discomfort, an embodied uneasiness experienced by both humans and animals, fostered an unexpected connection. In many other settings I struggled to initiate conversations about people’s interests, worldviews, and ethical commitments, but Mona and I connected with remarkable ease. The sweat, the tactile and emotionally charged work of care at the shelter, and the calm presence of the canines created a strangely comforting olfactory atmosphere. ‘These dogs are vaccinated and more resistant to diseases’, Mona noted, glancing at the dogs peacefully lounging around us. ‘Yet people still believe they carry rabies and smell bad (*badbu*)’.

The common lexeme for ‘smell’ in both Punjabi and Urdu derives from the Persian *bu*, which becomes a ‘good’ or ‘pleasant’ scent when prefixed with *khush* and a ‘bad’ or ‘disturbing’ odour when paired with the Persian *bad*. Much anthropological work on olfaction has similarly tended to categorise smell along a binary of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’: fragrance is often understood as fostering social intimacy, while stench is associated with division and disconnection.



FIGURE 2 The Head office of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), Lahore.

The moralisation of smell and the capacity to appear likeable or 'good', is thus closely tied to conceptions of personhood, particularly through the cultivation of olfactory sensitivity and the regulation of bodily odour (Howes & Classen, 2014, p. 136). In the South Asian context, however, smell is not primarily individualised; it is experienced within a shared sensory and moral universe. James McHugh (2007), while examining traditional Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist sources on smell in the Indian subcontinent, argued that historical classifications of odour were far more varied than simple moral binaries and played a central role in shaping aesthetic and affective experience. In Punjab too, it is largely the affective capacity of an odour, its ability to evoke an emotional response or capture a particular feeling, that determines whether it is cherished as an aroma or rejected as a foul stench.

The smell of *desi* dogs was not inherently 'bad'; rather, it bore social and moral connotations that produced a culturally specific aversion toward them. Mainly, local clerics, serving as figures of authority, used selective interpretations of Islamic texts and established canines as impure or, to invoke Mary Douglas's (1966, p. 36) famous formulation, as 'matter out of place'.<sup>1</sup> Gradually, dogs were relegated to the outskirts, far away from common sight. These peripheral zones also served as informal waste dumping grounds. As stray dogs scavenged among food waste there, this reinforced their impurity, associated them with material filth, uncleanness, and stench, and cemented their connection with moral and physical disgust.

According to Abid, a veterinarian in his early 30s who I also met at the NGO shelter, Lahore's expanding development projects have, however, once again brought scavenging dogs into direct and unavoidable proximity with humans. 'We are encroaching on the stray animals' territory now', he noted with analytic fervour. 'About 30 years ago, stray dogs lived on the outskirts. But now, there are no "outskirts". New housing developments have taken over those spaces'. With urban sprawl extending to every edge of the city, Abid explained, stray dogs are frequently struck



by vehicles, chased by boys playing cricket, or poisoned by authorities in newly built housing societies. Such encounters compel the animals to defend themselves, and these defensive bites only deepen existing stigmas. 'Unlike with purebred, domesticated dogs', he remarked, 'when a stray dog bites, people immediately assume it carries rabies. This reinforces the association between stray dogs and filth (*ghalazat*), dirt (*gandgi*), and stench (*badbu*)'. Abid has previously led a large-scale Trap, Neuter, Vaccinate, and Return (TNVR) campaign and had gone door-to-door in rural villages to cultivate public awareness. Yet despite these efforts, he felt a persistent sense of futility: 'The public and the state are not there to support us', he lamented.

The very odour that marked *desi* dogs as objects of community and state exclusion simultaneously enabled Mona and Abid to justify their presence within the shelter. There, injured animals received medical treatment: fractured limbs were set, maggots extracted, and antiseptics applied. Yet the shelter system remained profoundly overburdened. With only a handful of facilities, each operating beyond its capacity, the influx of new cases far exceeded what staff and volunteers could reasonably manage. For Mona, the only viable solution was rehousing. She insisted that *desi* dogs were not only more intelligent but also more resilient to Pakistan's climate than foreign purebreds. 'Some people from foreign embassies in Islamabad have adopted our stray dogs', she noted, 'but locals still believe they are dirty and emit a sickening odour (*nagwar-bu*)'.

These forms of exclusion were not limited to the dogs themselves; they extended to the humans who cared for them, as the animals' materiality was thought to diffuse onto human bodies through olfactory association. Mona, Abid, and many other volunteers often encountered social marginalisation precisely because they worked in environments saturated with smells that many considered offensive. Yet it was their very willingness to cross these moral and affective boundaries, and to inhabit, maintain, and labour within the shelter, that shaped their ethical commitments to more-than-human care.

The sensory presence of animals actively shaped modes of thinking, living, and knowing among many activists (cf. de Puig La Bellacasa, 2017). The animals in the shelter were enmeshed in an intimate sensorium with those who cared for them: one could not touch them without being touched in return, smell them without being smelled, or endure the oppressive heat without recognising that the animals were experiencing the same. This knotted, reciprocal experience cultivated a sense of familiarity grounded not in distance or detachment but in proximity and mutual exposure. Care emerged through these shared sensations, through an affective entanglement that unsettled categorical boundaries of exclusion.

For me too, as I lingered in these shelters and as my own bodily odour mingled with that of the animals—an olfactory blending often intensified by heat and excessive sweat—I found that some people preferred to keep their distance. Within the shelter, however, this sensory condition created a welcoming site for ethnographic inquiry. Through this participant sensation, as I became immersed in the shelter's olfactory atmosphere and experienced the smells of animals, humidity, labour, and human bodies, my connection with interlocutors deepened. In this environment of sensory co-presence, many opened up with striking honesty, recounting stories of rescuing injured strays, navigating the challenges of activism, and confronting the ongoing struggle for animal rights in Pakistan.

As I gradually became *with* my interlocutors and shared in the sensescapes of the animal shelters, I came to understand how, in the sensuously rich presence of animals, one can encounter a dimension of life that is often hidden: a reciprocal world of sharing and receiving, of caring and being cared for, of feeling and being felt, of smelling and being sniffed. Through this embodied and olfactory presence, personal narratives emerged and stories of connections with animals unfolded. I learned how animals, through their corporeal presence and affective comportment,

offered many volunteers experiences that exceed the capacities of mundane human relationships. In these conversations, the smell of animals became an avenue for understanding and appreciating the solace they provide to humans, at times teaching the value of unconditional care.

#### 4 | THE DONKEY AND THE AFTERLIFE OF SKIN

Like dogs, donkeys occupy a deeply stigmatised position in South Asia, perceived as dirty, malodorous, and intrinsically linked to pollution. This stigma is historically rooted: since their incorporation as draught animals roughly 5000 years ago, donkeys have been closely associated with labouring communities that were already at the lower strata of the caste hierarchy. As the equine labour and human marginalisation conjoined, this produced a shared olfactory imaginary in which both donkey and keeper were conceived to emit the odour of drudgery, a sensory marker that reinforced and naturalised social hierarchies (Lee, 2021). Importantly, the smell of working bodies carried more than an ideological weight; it also structured material and lived consequences for equines and their keepers. I learned such dynamics more fully during my engagement with Sidra Qureshi, another animal welfare activist based in Lahore.

Sidra and I met at an animal shelter she had managed for the previous 5 years. The shelter accommodated hundreds of dogs and cats, several injured black kites retrieved from Lahore's polluted skies, and a small group of donkeys. After feeding the cats and attending to the dogs and donkeys, who responded to her presence with excitement, she would retreat to a cramped office that doubled as an operating room for emergency procedures. During one visit, a sudden power outage silenced the lone pedestal fan, leaving us sweltering and dehydrated. Yet this shared discomfort, intensified by air saturated with medicinal fumes and the lingering odours of sick bodies, created an effortless familiarity. It was within this atmosphere, a convergence of intense heat, the state's policies of unannounced power outages in the peripheries, and sensory saturation, that Sidra began narrating her life stories.

When Sidra's family moved to the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), a neighbourhood for Lahore's rich, she was appalled by the plight of stray dogs. 'The DHA used to kill the dogs and leave the pups behind', she recalled. At first, she adopted a few puppies herself, but the scale of suffering quickly exceeded what she could manage alone. Determined to do more, she began searching for a site where she could establish an animal shelter, a space in which unwanted animals might receive care beyond the reach of societal neglect. Her efforts were repeatedly thwarted: potential landlords refused to lease their property for what they disparagingly called a 'space of stench' near their homes or workplaces. After 2 years of persistent searching, just as she was on the verge of securing a suitable plot, she was confronted with an unexpected question from the potential owner: 'Are you one of those who supply donkeys to China?' The inquiry unsettled her. As she investigated more, she learned that, only months earlier, representatives of a local Chinese organisation had sought to rent land in the vicinity to establish a donkey slaughterhouse.

As discussed earlier, donkeys and dogs endure some of the most precarious conditions in Pakistan, a vulnerability shaped largely by their religious and cultural stigmatisation. No provincial department assumes responsibility for their care. Of the two state bodies concerned with animals in Punjab, the Livestock Department focuses exclusively on economically valuable species (cows, buffaloes, goats, and sheep) while the Wildlife Department directs its attention toward deer, migratory birds, Indus River dolphins, and other protected fauna. Donkeys and other equines once fell under the purview of the SPCA, but chronic underfunding has rendered the



organisation largely inactive. Although regional offices of some international NGOs receive dedicated funding for donkey welfare, their impact, according to Sidra, remains minimal: 'they do nothing but sit in their air-conditioned offices, collect salary cheques'. Her frustration prompted me to visit one such NGO to understand how welfare work was conceptualised and implemented within these institutional spaces.

When I arrived at the regional office of an international NGO in Lahore, situated in one of the city's wealthiest suburbs, I met the Program Officer responsible for donkey welfare in Pakistan. The meeting itself echoed Sidra's critique: we sat in an air-conditioned boardroom, insulated from the oppressive heat and the thick, persistent odours of the animal shelters where donkeys were actually tended. The Program Officer spoke at length about project frameworks, capacity-building workshops, and donor accountability requirements, yet there was little sense of the material and sensory conditions that shaped daily animal care. This physical, sensory, and ethical distance made visible the institutional separation between NGO welfare discourse and the embodied labour of those who worked directly with animals.

In *What Comes After Entanglement?*, Giraud (2019, p. 121) urges us to attend closely to hierarchies of care and the implications they produce. Her discussion of social media campaigns advocating for laboratory beagles highlights the ethical ambiguities that emerge when certain beings become hyper-visible objects of concern while others remain unacknowledged. Giraud's analysis sharpened my own observations when I visited the NGO office. The NGO's primary investment, it soon became evident, was in the 'abstract' donkey: an animal rendered through seminars, workshops, charts, graphs, and reports rather than through lived encounters. This abstract donkey overshadowed the situated donkey—the animal residing in a welfare shelter, cared for by marginalised communities in rural regions, and burdened with an olfactory stigma that marked it as polluted in the public imagination. While the abstract donkey functioned as a privileged figure of advocacy, the situated donkey remained an object of exclusion. The potential for equines to generate relational ethics with local activists and caregivers was, in effect, overshadowed by the NGO's cultivated distance. It was, as Giraud (2019, p. 10) observes, 'the desire for nonrelation' that elucidated 'the inevitability of exclusion'.

Although donkeys appeared in a few animal welfare shelters, they were usually present in very small numbers, most often when recovering from injuries or abuse. No shelter existed specifically for equines. 'Where can I find donkeys?' I once asked Sidra, and she immediately pointed me toward Kasur. I had already heard from several people that the tanneries of Kasur were the key site for understanding the ultimate fate of donkey skins. Soon, I began my journey from Lahore to Kasur, travelling toward this historic Punjabi city.

## 5 | CODA: A RETURN TO TANNERIES

The aroma of sandalwood drink still lingered with me when Ali and I arrived in inner Kasur. In the searing heat of July, the tanneries smelled of death and post-death, a pungent (*nagwar*) stench of decay and preservation of skins. The streets were flooded with chemical effluents, their greenish, poison-like water generating white foam as it spilled into open drains. Here, the donkey appeared primarily through its skin: treated with sodium sulphide and other chemicals before its eventual transformation into a polished leather product. Yet the donkey was also present as a living labouring body, hauling the hides of other donkeys, mules, horses, cows, buffaloes, sheep, and goats. Despite my inquiries, the afterlives of these skins, whether they travelled to Hong Kong, entered mainland China, or contributed to the multimillion-dollar *ejiao* industry,



FIGURE 3 Donkeys as labouring bodies and as bodies of skin.

remained uncertain. What I did learn, however, was that donkey leather was considered especially valuable, coveted by urban elites in Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Lahore, and transformed into commodities far removed from the labouring bodies that produced them (Figure 3).

Nestled among the stench-filled tanneries stood a small leather shop displaying polished wallets, belts, and handbags. The leather was polished, dyed, stitched, and moulded into objects of desire, effectively erasing its material and bodily connection to the animal from which it originated, as well as the lower-class labourers who transformed it. Detached from all sensory association, the leather was judged solely on its appearance and utility.

Just outside, however, marginalised workers toiled knee-deep in acid tanks, reliming and dyeing without protective masks, scraping off hair, dirt, and blood with bare hands. Their bodies absorbed the odour of animals and chemicals, reinforcing cultural hierarchies through what Kapoor (2021, p. 985) describes as the entrenched association between smell, impurity, and caste-related exclusion. Butt (2023, p. 172) goes even further to argue that disgust toward the smell of religious or caste others forms a repulsion that can harden into contempt and hatred toward those who labour with waste materials. In Kasur, as tannery workers absorbed the smell of the skin, this odour forcefully positioned them as people whose lives unfolded in sociocultural domains marked by marginality.

Despite its stigmatising power, odour also possesses the potential to draw beings into intimate proximity (Bubandt, 1998). This was evident in Lahore's animal shelters, where rescuing the injured, nursing the neglected, and coordinating mass vaccination drives were all structured through sensory encounters with animals' bodies. For many workers, the tactile and olfactory engagement with animals was not defined by disgust; rather, it was recognised as a site of transformation, where socially discarded beings became ethical Others. The scents of dogs, donkeys, and other animals, the very beings often seen by middle-class Pakistanis as signs of undesirability, reinforced animal welfare workers' connections with more-than-human Others. Through this olfactory intimacy, they clarified their purpose, solidified their values, and saw their ethic of care take form.



As I attended to these heat-intensified odours that permeated Kasur's tanneries and Lahore's animal shelters, it revealed how smell is central in constituting social and multispecies relations in contemporary Pakistan. Odour, I found, does more than signal proximity; it shapes ethical orientations, marks caste and cultural boundaries, and generates conditions for both exclusion and unexpected intimacy. In this way, smell emerged as an ethnographic tool, one that illuminated the affective and relational textures of multispecies care. This was especially important in a moment of accelerating climate extremes, when heat magnified the odour of bodies, and unsettled normative distinctions between pure and impure, self and other.

As my fieldwork became an experience of sharing sensory perceptions, it opened new pathways for ethnographic engagement through 'participant sensation'. This sensory engagement, intensified by the heatwave, revealed the active role of the environment in shaping various olfactory experiences of care, labour, and relatedness. It extended my methodological repertoire beyond classical observational techniques and demanded an embodied, affective praxis: an intertwinement rather than detachment, and a reflexive storytelling attentive to the sensuous immediacy of lived experience. It revealed how recognising smell as both analytic and method allows us to understand climate, bodies, labour, and sensory worlds, and explore how they converge to shape the everyday politics of care and exclusion in Pakistan.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> For an alternative interpretation of the dog's status in Islam, including the honoured dog of the People of the Cave in the Qur'an, the Prophet's well-known narration in which compassion toward a thirsty dog becomes a path to divine acceptance, and Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shah's celebrated verses extolling the virtues of dogs, see Kavesh (2021, pp. 93–95).

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