It was winter in north India. The mornings were blanketed with a cold fog that had rolled in over night. I was at the government-sponsored Center for Dairy Research in north India, where I conducted part of my dissertation fieldwork. Its concrete landscapes were colder than ever. Still, many of my interlocutors took no shelter or respite. Their daily rhythms of labor were tied to the tireless tempos of bovine existence. As “animal health workers”—which is to say, staff without veterinary degrees but responsible for everyday practices of care and management in the Centers—their work was in the business of life and death, sickness and health.

One thing I learned during my time at the Center, which is surprisingly easy for urbanites like myself to forget, is that there is no life without death, and to the extent that something like a dairy industry is premised on the commodification of the stuff of life itself, there is no increasing production without also increasing its opposite, exhaustion. There was a word for this, I learned: “Production diseases.”

Among these are zoonotic diseases, those illnesses that can be transferred from animals to humans. COVID-19 is of course one of these, but more pressing during my research was a zoonotic disease known as FMD, or, “Foot and Mouth Disease.” FMD causes painful wounds (jakhane) on cloven hooves, tongues, and mammary glands. These lead to secondary problems for cattle, such as, lameness, recumbency, and going off feed, which then hamper milk production. It also causes heart disease and death in calves.
As such, workers were up well before the mist. They toiled day and night. Controlling FMD, moreover, was no easy task. It is an extremely contagious, viral disease that can travel up to sixty kilometers by air over land, and 300 kilometers over sea. It can be transmitted on inanimate objects—clothing, shoes, and vehicles—and can even live in the respiratory tracts of human beings for up to two days. FMD can also be harbored in the milk and semen of infected animals—both of which are substances used in everyday practices feeding and breeding—long before signs of infection materialize (OIE 2018). In turn, morbidity may easily reach 100% during an FMD outbreak.

Culling—“the humane destruction of all infected and exposed animals”—is thus a key management strategy for countries that are FMD-free (CFIA 2012). Yet during the FMD outbreak of January 2019, under the Haryana Gauvansh Savarakshān and Gausamvardhan Act (2015), the slaughter of any cow, bull, or calf industries was banned at my fieldsite. Techniques and technologies to manage the outbreak were less final, less radical, less tidy. Instead, they were routinized, chronic, and covered in drool, pus, and dung.

Below: Humans, animal, and microbial bodies encountering each other in potentially viral events.
Footbaths and mouthwash, quarantine and new standards for the disposal of dead bodies: These were techniques of control that required constant application, as well as patience. Indeed, the rains had come by the time the last mass footbath was given to CDR’s cows, bulls, calves.

They were techniques, moreover, that were embodied for worker and animal alike. Laborers had to put their own bodies on the line through practices of containment and sanitization that are often simultaneously acts of care and violence.

This photo story inserts itself into this context. It attempts to capture moments of encounter in all their messiness. It asks: How might the visual rendering of one case of interspeciated wellbeing and risk provoke us to think new thoughts about human and animal welfare? That is, to the extent that there was no single solution, no quick fix to the FMD problem, and it instead required a radical ethics of simply “being-with,” what lessons might it offer us as we grapple with emerging diseases and other symptoms of planetary exhaustion?
Scenes from CDR during the FMD outbreak of January 2019.