Final Report

Auto Anna and the Hot Seat

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1. Summary

While climate change across Bengaluru is frequently documented through satellite data, meteorological models, and land surface temperature maps, these frameworks rarely capture the physical realities experienced at street level. For the city's informal transport workforce, specifically auto-rickshaw drivers operating open-air three-wheelers for almost eight to twelve hours a day, increasing urban heat is an immediate occupational hazard shaped by asphalt, concretisation, vehicle exhausts, and reducing tree cover across the city.

Supported by the Bengaluru Sustainability Forum's Small Grants Programme 2025, the project, initially titled **Auto Anna and the Hot Seat**, produced an illustrated bilingual children's storybook titled **Auto Akka and the Hot Seat**. This shift was undertaken specifically to bring into focus the under-represented narratives, lived experiences, and compound climate vulnerabilities of women auto-rickshaw drivers (Auto Akkas) in Bengaluru. Based on real interviews, the project tackles this urgent challenge with an accessible approach towards climate education, making complex ideas like climate change, urban heat islands, hydration, and thermal comfort relatable through a journey across the city.

Over a twelve-month timeline, the project translated qualitative field research into an accessible civic and engagement tool through an integrated process:

- **Field Research & Community Engagement:** Conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with approximately 50 auto-rickshaw drivers across five contrasting Bengaluru neighbourhoods (Rajajinagar, Sanjay Nagar/Hebbal, Bannerghatta Road, Indiranagar Metro Station, and regular auto commutes), followed by four structured co-design workshops with driver unions like the Peace Auto Group and the Karnataka Women's Drivers Association.
- **Participatory Methodology:** Developed and deployed the Heat Card Game (adapted from ATREE's Ready to Act Climate Game), enabling drivers to articulate their lived experiences, occupational health implications, regulatory constraints, and grassroots cooling hacks.
- **Bilingual Publication:** Authored, illustrated, and printed an engaging children's storybook in English and Kannada, complete with interactive activity pages designed to keep children actively engaged.
- **Multi-Scalar Dissemination:** Hosted interactive reading and workshop sessions across civic and cultural venues, bookstores, and schools. We also added an in-auto QR-code across participating vehicles, allowing commuters to read the digital bilingual edition during daily transit.

A decisive turning point emerged during early fieldwork: women auto drivers experience an acute, gender-differentiated vulnerability due to the severe deficit of safe, accessible public sanitation facilities across the city. To avoid searching for non-existent or unusable toilets, many women drivers intentionally ration their water intake throughout long shifts, resulting in chronic dehydration, heat exhaustion, and urinary tract infections. Recognizing this critical intersection of labour dignity, infrastructure deficits, and climate exposure, the project deliberately revised its title and focus from Auto Anna to Auto Akka.

Ultimately, the project translates technical urban heat island research into an empathetic, relatable narrative. It equips children, parents, educators, and daily commuters with an understanding of how urban design, tree canopy preservation, and basic civic amenities directly affect the wellbeing of the frontline workers who sustain the city's transport infrastructure.

2. Project Highlights

- **Extensive Grassroots Field Engagement:** Interviewed roughly 50 auto-rickshaw drivers across areas in the city (Rajajinagar, Sanjay Nagar/Hebbal, Bannerghatta Road, Indiranagar Metro Station) and formalised insights across union and group workshops with participants from Peace Auto Group and KWDA.
- **The "Heat Card Game":** Customised ATREE's Ready to Act Climate Game into a three-deck participatory tool (Time, Risk, and Solution cards) that enabled drivers to articulate structural barriers, health impacts, and coping mechanisms.
- **Pivoting to Gendered Labour Realities:** Shifted focus to Bengaluru's women auto drivers (Auto Akkas) and integrated the idea of gendered barriers into the public climate dialogue.
- **Bilingual Storybook Publication:** Authored, translated, and printed Auto Akka and the Hot Seat in English and Kannada, featuring grounded visuals and contextual world-building, and also an open-ended narrative.
- **Multiple Readings and Workshop:** Conducted interactive readings, participatory game sessions and workshops at many cultural and independent literary institutions, organisations, bookstores, and schools, including Bangalore International Centre (BIC), Atta Galatta Bookstore, Beku Bookstore, Kadhaigal Bookstore, Prakriti Shala School, and the Museum of Art & Photography (MAP) Bengaluru, among many others.
- **In-Auto Book Access:** Installed QR-code stickers on auto-rickshaw seat backs, turning rides into a way that the passengers can read the book, and facilitate dialogue between commuters and drivers.

3. Community Engagement with Auto Drivers

3.1 Scale and Methodology of Engagement

3.1.1 Field Interviews

Between November and December 2025, five detailed field interview sessions were conducted across contrasting Bengaluru neighbourhoods like Rajajinagar, Sanjay Nagar / Hebbal, Bannerghatta Road, Indiranagar Metro Station, and also through informal discussions held during routine auto commutes across the city. Across these sessions, approximately 50

auto drivers were interviewed to understand street-level heat exposure and occupational routines.

3.1.2 Driver Selection Strategy

The strategy used to select the random drivers to interact with about their experience on urban heat was based on noticing makeshift accessories such as shade for their mobile phones to protect them from overheating and external heat, carrying a water bottle covered in a wet cloth, installing a fan, or other improvised accessories which creates artificial breeze.

3.1.3 Structured Workshops

Between January and May 2026, four formal workshops were conducted with two key driver collectives, the Peace Auto Group and the Karnataka Women's Drivers Association. Each workshop brought together between 10 and 25 auto drivers. The participant cohort spanned a wide spectrum of occupational tenure, from newly licensed trainees to veteran drivers with over 35 years of on-road experience. The opening workshop with Peace Auto Group included a mixed cohort of male and female drivers, establishing baseline comparisons between shared environmental exposures and gender-differentiated realities.

3.1.4 Heat Card Game Method

During the first two workshops, the team used the Heat Card Game, which is a participatory tool adapted from ATREE's Ready to Act Climate Game. The game operated across three card decks:

1. **Time Cards:** Temporal scales including Today, Tomorrow, Next Week, Next Month, and Next Year.
2. **Risk Cards:** Specific thermal and occupational hazards impacting drivers and vehicles (engine overheating, traffic bottlenecks on concrete corridors, dehydration, smartphone crashes).
3. **Solution Cards:** Proposed grassroots and behavioural responses to those issues.

This participatory tool was more than just an activity. It helped drivers articulate their understanding of climate change and urban heat, its impact on their health, and the solutions they use to counter heat issues during work.

During the card game sessions, the following insights surfaced:

- Many men and women auto drivers were illiterate. They often sought help from their community to read and write, including use of mobile phone services (location, apps). During the game session, they helped each other read, articulate, and write customised solutions on blank cards.
- Another key observation was that drivers often gravitated toward discussion of broader personal and professional struggles, beyond heat impacts and coping strategies, including opposition to bike taxis and ride-hailing apps, calls for political support, concerns around dignity and respect, and livelihood security more generally. Most of them also considered customer service through passenger comfort and safety as their key goal.
- When "Remove Uniform" was one of the heat solution cards, drivers flagged the legal risk, noting they could be penalised by the traffic police for breaking uniform compliance.
- One of the male auto drivers had recently gone through heart surgery due to poor eating habits because of his profession.
- Another male auto driver said he went through depression balancing work-personal life with issues such as managing finances, dealing with pollution and traffic.
- A senior male auto driver with 35 years of experience said he had piles operation at the beginning of his driving career, and apparently it never came back, according to his doctor.
- The key contact person of the Peace Auto Group—Paru—said she would often skip eating food to drinking tea, highlighting lack of nutrition and poor eating habits.
- Almost all women auto drivers expressed satisfaction with having shifted from work as house help or security guards to driving an auto because of the flexibility and financial independence it offered.
- Both auto union groups highlighted the strength of their internal community support, if anyone had any issue with the auto rickshaw, or a customer, or even using the online ride platforms.
- They also showed strong loyalty towards their groups.

- The Peace Auto Group, one of the two driver collectives that participated in our community workshops, includes members affiliated with the Taliru Foundation, per conversations with the drivers themselves. Taliru Foundation is a Bengaluru-based non-profit that trains women from underprivileged communities as professional auto-rickshaw drivers, with a curriculum that extends beyond driving skills to financial literacy, legal rights, self-defense, and emotional wellbeing support. This existing layer of training meant several Peace Auto Group members brought prior exposure to structured group learning and confidence in articulating personal and workplace challenges, both of which shaped how readily they engaged with the Heat Card Game format.
- The project was initially titled Auto Anna & the Hot Seat, but outreach to auto union groups received a poor response. Through the Taliru Foundation and other contacts, we connected with women auto-rickshaw drivers instead. As we met more Auto Akkas (more than 2,500 in Bengaluru)—both experienced drivers and trainees—listening to their specific challenges reshaped both the narrative and the title, which became Auto Akka and the Hot Seat.

3.2 Draft Feedback Workshops with Auto Akkas

The subsequent two workshops were structured around iterative script reading and feedback sessions on the first bilingual draft of the storybook with driver groups:

- **Narrative Reception:** The Auto Akkas responded positively to the storyline. Several participants specifically praised the open-ended narrative conclusion, noting that it felt distinctive and honest compared to conventional moral-based stories and tales.
- **Emotional Resonance:** Auto Akkas enjoyed the story; a few specifically praised the open-ended concept as different. Some also noted the rarity of seeing their daily labour treated with dignity in a storybook.
- **Sanitation Demands:** An Auto Akka suggested including other insights, such as the lack of/ poor quality of toilet facilities and its impact on women auto drivers.
- **Tree Planting Suggestions:** A few drivers recommended integrating solutions like community tree planting into the storyline.

- **Edits:** Our response was to keep the intended audience, the children, in mind, ensuring the story remained simple and featured the kind of everyday solutions Auto Akkas already use.

3.3 Community Book Launch with Peace Auto Group

The formal launch event was held with Auto Akkas from the Peace Auto Group in the last week of June 2026:

- The session had approximately 28 Auto Akkas, several of whom attended alongside their children.
- Participants engaged with the book. They thoroughly enjoyed the reading, especially the Acknowledgements section, which made them emotional and proud.
- Each attending driver was presented with a personal Kannada copy of the printed storybook, along with QR-code stickers linked to the digital PDF edition for installation on their vehicle seat backs to engage passengers.
- The session concluded with a participatory activity where the drivers were handed out a printed outline of an auto rickshaw and asked to design their own version of a 'cool auto.'

3.4 Depth of Relationship Building

The project prioritised long-term collaborative trust over one-off, transactional research:

- Repeat visits to the Peace Auto and KWDA collectives demonstrated respect for the drivers as primary knowledge holders and co-creators of the work.
- The Heat Card Game acted as a good entry point. Because some solution cards intentionally did not match active issue cards, participants had to debate creative justifications or write original solutions, turning the research environment into an enjoyable, collaborative space.
- This consistency in trust-building allowed the Auto Akkas to share feedback on the book’s first narrative.
- After the book launch, Paru, the key point of contact and other key participating Auto Akkas have been involved in the book’s reading sessions at different venues and direct engagement with the public. These opportunities have offered them space to share their

experiences as female auto drivers and the impact of heat. We also advocate for honorariums for their time at these engagements. This has deepened the relationship.

4. Narrative Development

4.1 Production Pipeline and Process

The book moved through a complex production pipeline through the 12 months of the project:

Interviews + Workshops ⟶ *Story Outline* ⟶ *Onboarding Illustrator Radha* ⟶ *Moodboard / Visual Style* ⟶ *Full Script* ⟶ *Bilingual First Draft* ⟶ *Feedback Session with Auto Akkas* ⟶ *Expert Review* ⟶ *Copyediting* ⟶ *Print Testing* ⟶ *Publication* ⟶ *Disemmination*

4.2 Emotional Anchors and Visual Symbolism

Our initial storyline centred on a brother-sister duo and an auto-driving family learning about heatwaves through an Environmental Studies (EVS) school lesson, using a formal classroom framing to introduce climate literacy. However, through conversations with people who write storybooks, we pivoted. They suggested anchoring the narrative in something a child connects with intuitively, like an everyday item, place, or memory that holds emotional weight, rather than relying on a school lesson.

We reshaped the plot around young Ravi, who loses his favourite water bottle on a sweltering afternoon and sets out across the city to track it down with his mother by hailing an auto-rickshaw. Using the lost bottle as our emotional anchor, we wove symbolic details throughout the narrative and illustrations to reinforce the core theme: the name Ravi is a name of the sun, the blue water bottle represents hydration and relief from the heat, and Amma bargaining with a vendor over chillies in the market offers a subtle, relatable nod to ‘heat’ itself. These deliberate design choices run consistently through the story's visual and textual imagery.

4.3 From Conversations to Text

The insights gathered through field interviews and the Heat Card Game workshops did not remain as background research. These themes were deliberately narrativised into the book, rather than generically put into "climate awareness":

Environmental and heat-island testimony: drivers' accounts of Hebbal flyover, Marathahalli, and Varthur as high-heat zones with little tree cover validated the data in reports and secondary literature. It also informed the book's narrative about moving from concrete-dense areas to inner tree-covered areas, letting young readers connect real neighbourhood-level heat patterns to a citywide picture rather than an abstract concept of "warming."

Visual details: concrete structures, tall glass buildings, dense tree cover, and physical sensations, like the contrast between a cool breeze and hot air, were both drawn directly from real drivers' coping routines. These are the kinds of tangible details that work well in a children's book, rather than being invented for effect.

Adaptation strategies drivers described: stopping for tea, drinking buttermilk, wrapping water bottles in wet cloths, were incorporated as scenes or activity prompts. These details are important as they teach a concrete adaptation strategy while keeping the story grounded and Bengaluru-specific.

Gender-specific findings: While men and women drivers face the same rising temperatures, our field research surfaced a second, gendered layer of constraint, women's coping strategies are shaped as much by infrastructure and safety limitations as by heat itself. Water rationing and associated health risks (piles, UTI, gut issues), hostility from male drivers (experienced by some women auto drivers in North Bangalore), and blurred vision due to excess heat, presented an editorial challenge given the intended child readership.

We omitted findings that were too complex for the young audience and used simple representations in the main narrative through language and imagery. We note this decision explicitly here because it reflects a deliberate choice about how to represent the full weight of the research responsibly.

5. Making the Illustrations

5.1 Understanding the Characters and Their Attire

The characters were developed by observing Auto Akkas and the way they dress, carry themselves, and interact with their surroundings. These everyday details helped shape characters that feel familiar and approachable, people the reader could easily recognise from their own neighbourhood.

The little boy, dressed in his school uniform, and his Amma were designed to feel equally familiar to children. As the story follows the boy through his journey, the aim was for young readers to see a little bit of themselves in him.

Another important character in the book is the blue water bottle. Its design was inspired by the school bottles many of us have owned, misplaced, or lost at some point, making it a small but relatable part of the story.

5.2 Visualising Heat

Heat is an important part of the story, but representing something as abstract as heat through illustrations needed some thought. Instead of relying on the usual reds and oranges, white was used to represent the harshness of the sun, the kind of brightness that almost blinds you. This was contrasted with a bright, summery colour palette and sharp purple shadows. The palette was kept simple and carefully balanced so that the characters and important elements remained the focus of each scene.

5.3 Adding Details and Simplifying Ideas

Small details are an important part of the visual language of the book. Alongside the main story, the illustrations include little elements that add to the experience without distracting from it. Tiny heat meters appear throughout the book to show just how hot each scene is. A map spread, designed almost like a loading screen, also appears midway through the story, giving the reader a visual pause while helping move the story forward.

5.4 Layouting the Scenes

Each scene was approached differently depending on where we wanted the reader to experience it from. The perspective keeps changing throughout the book, allowing the reader to see the story from different points of view. At times, the reader is placed inside the auto, looking at the characters and their surroundings. At other times, they are outside on the road, watching the auto move through the city. These changes in perspective help keep the scenes varied and make the reader feel more involved in the journey.

These details were used to make the book more engaging while keeping the ideas simple and easy for children to follow.

6. Impact and Outcomes

Building Civic Empathy Across Demographics: The project reframed auto drivers from service providers into knowledgeable street observers. Public reading audiences noted that seeing an Auto Akka lead a story changed how they view the drivers they pass on the street every day. We have received many photographs and messages of how people are interacting with the book and auto rickshaw drivers on the road.

Highlighting Gendered Heat Vulnerabilities: By highlighting how the city's toilet shortage forces women drivers to dehydrate themselves on hot days, the project has expanded local climate discussions to include basic sanitation access.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Working Around Informal Work Hours: Auto drivers earn their livelihoods hour by hour. Sessions had to be planned around mid-morning lulls and late afternoon shifts, and drivers were compensated with honorariums for taking time away from driving.

Balancing Complex Realities with Children's Storytelling: Translating harsh issues, like chronic UTIs, police harassment, and economic distress, into a story for primary school children required careful editorial balance. The book focuses on everyday care and hydration in the story, while addressing structural problems in the resource section. The aim was not

create a story that is moralistic in nature, but rather an engagement tool for children to interact with cities.

Overcoming Outreach Hurdles: Early attempts to engage large male-dominated driver unions saw low interest. Partnering with community-based groups like the Taliru Foundation, Peace Auto Group, and KWDA helped build the trust needed to ground the project in authentic lived experiences.

Print Production Constraints: Managing high paper and colour-proofing costs within a grant budget required careful production planning. Developing the companion in-auto QR network helped extend the project's reach without exceeding print limits.

8. Future Plans and Strategies

Translating the Storybook: We hope to now have translations in multiple languages, including Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam. We also hope to increase readership through partnering with regional language publishers like BooksLoka in Karnataka.

School Curriculum Partnerships: We hope to partner with primary schools and local learning networks to integrate Auto Akka and the Hot Seat into elementary Environmental Studies reading lists. We also hope to host many more readings sessions and workshops with schools and learning centres in Bangalore, and across.

Open-Source Educational Toolkit: We want to develop the Heat Card Game as an open-access, downloadable print-and-play PDF for teachers, community educators, and parents.

Developing a Series of Stories on Climate Change: We hope to develop a series with different climate change stressors and urban climate challenges, and focus on vulnerable worker groups like gig workers, street vendors, etc.

Expanding the In-Auto Reading Method: We hope to work with local driver networks to install QR-code stickers across more auto-rickshaws in Bengaluru.

Audio Storybook Production: We want to record a dramatised, Kannada-language audio edition with street soundscapes to reach broader audiences.