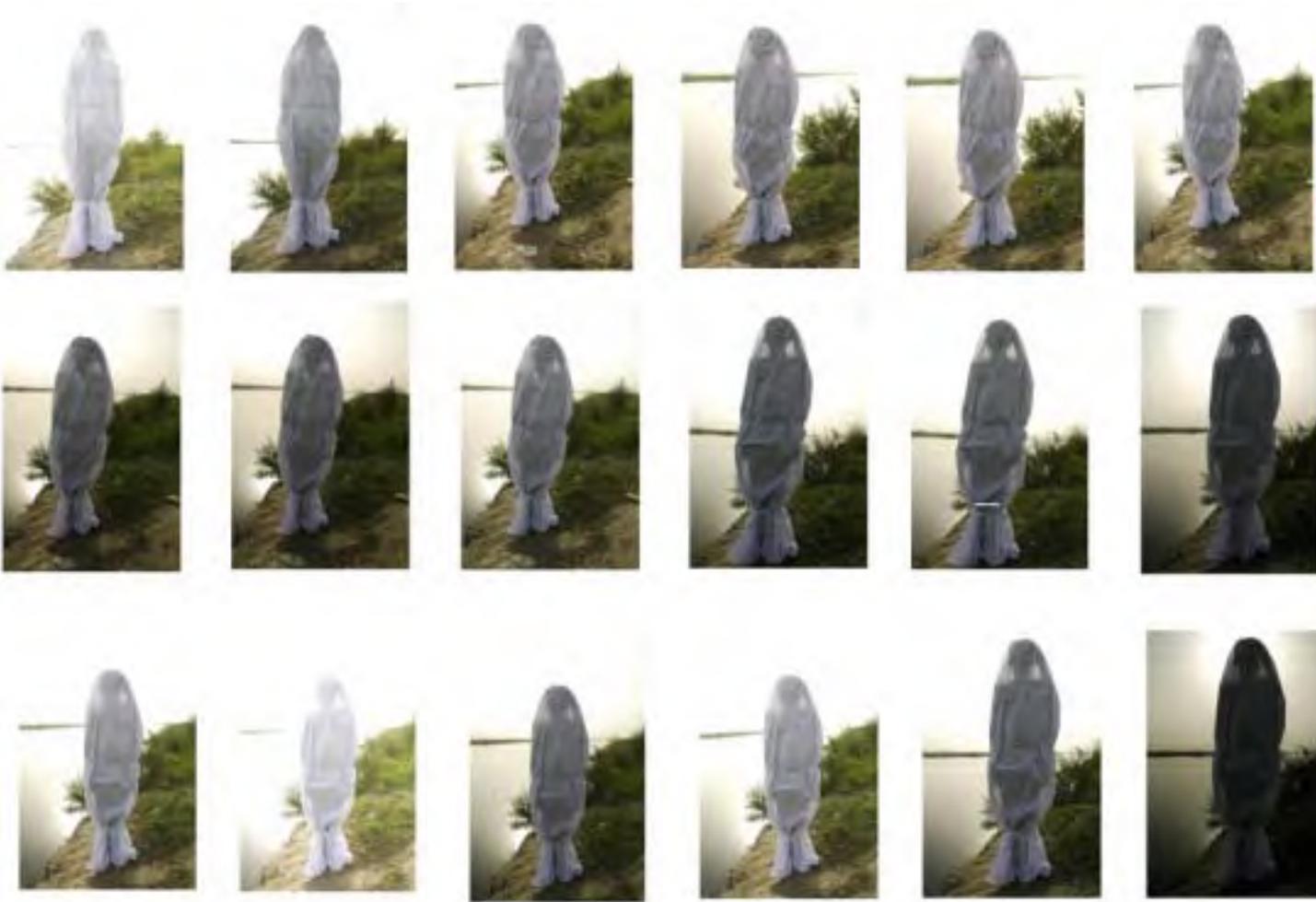


**immersion**



**emergence**



ravi agarwal

**immersion**

**emergence**

**ravi agarwal**

**the shroud :**  
**self-portrait**  
April 27, 2006





As the review drew me in, it led me to another  
the Ganga at Rishikesh. It had excited me  
for a frontal release. The 'Shroud' became  
compulsive in my mind and I had to 'perform'  
it on the banks of the Jamuna.

18<sup>th</sup> June, 2006

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*To my parents*

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To the river waters, who let me in. To those who live on and around it.

To my friends, family and colleagues, who were there at my asking, some all the while, some who joined along the way, or had to leave, even as I came and went.

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To all those artists, writers, philosophers, thinkers, activists, who thought, wrote, felt about our times, and times past, and helped me think and understand many things better.

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Finally to Hivos for its generous financial contribution and all those in Youthreach for believing in and for so unquestioningly being part of this venture.

# Preface

**My recurring engagement with the river** happened between January 2004 and June 2006. Over these two odd years, I visited and re-visited the river Yamuna, the lifeline of Delhi, often many times a week, walking along its banks for long distances. In between my environmental work, based at Toxics Link, and my fragmented life in the city, the river had quietly soaked into the interstices. It had, unknown to me, seeped in as a healer and a life force, as I was to later discover. Drawing me to its banks, mostly in the early mornings, and evenings, its flowing solitude resonated with layers of my self, as they uncovered themselves even to me. Despite it being black with sewage, never did I see the river as dirty. It seemed timeless, beyond life and death, as it momentarily led me to 'transcend' my being into a timeless state as well. Within this private inaudible conversation, I had many others too. Mainly with those who live on the river, even as they were being displaced from it, owing to the cities new hunger for land. I also took pictures, for the camera had never left my side since I first held it at the age of thirteen, and taking pictures was part of my every day engagement of life. My work as an environmental activist often seems to draw differently into parts of myself and sometimes in conflicting ways. The 'dirty' river demanded to be cleaned, and that meant that the politics of the city be engaged with, with all the accompanying shrillness and public rhetoric which campaigning demands. But the 'ever flowing' river also drew 'me' inwards, into those undefined silent spaces where even the water's murmur became loud and clear, and all I could do was be still. This traversing from one to the other was often exhausting, but something I have had to cope with for a long long time. It seems that we all are multiple beings.

Over these two years, the river silently posed many questions and drove me to know more about our times. I read like never before, to try and find out why the river was dirty, or why there was only debris on its banks, either in the form of poor people or as junk, or why new city wealth gave rise to filth, or why we forget that we die. I know I still have no answers, but feel I understand the questions better, as well as my anxiety about them. In the background was a vicious city politics at play, of dirty water, poor people, priceless land, the forthcoming Commonwealth Games, city planners, big money and all 'public' debates couched in an inaccessible language of science.

What made me visit the river time and again, is a more difficult question to answer. Maybe the nostalgia of engrained images from my childhood forays on it, when the water was clean and the wagtails still scurried on its banks, maybe the need to deal with a deep personal crisis, maybe to rediscover my roots in an increasingly changing city, maybe to recover my sense of self or maybe just to reduce the alienation I felt all around. But it did all begin and it did all end one day. The recurring visits stopped. The 'Shroud' was both an immersion and an emergence.

Is water used to serve a brook the same?  
How else dispose of an immortal force  
No longer needed? Staunch it at its source  
with under loads dumped down? The brook  
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone  
In sepia darkness still to live and run —  
And <sup>all</sup> for nothing it had ever done  
Except forget to go in fear perhaps.  
No one would know except for ancient maps  
That such a brook ran water. But I wonder  
If from its being kept forever under  
The thoughts may not have risen that so  
This newly built city from both work <sup>keep</sup>  
and sleep. "  
"A brook in the city"  
Robert Frost.



March 11, 2004



April 12, 2006



April 24, 2005



June 15, 2004



Sept 3, 2004





Dear all

Today morning Diya and I visited the site for demolitions at Yamuna Pushta New Delhi to take photographs which could be circulated into the wider public. Nothing I saw there, can I really describe in words, or at least in a few words. What was earlier a human settlement was now rubble.

Bombed and razed. War zone. Somewhere black and burned.

Everywhere debris, with the landscape broken by human faces and a numb everydayness as people cooked in private places turned public and bathed in the open. Vegetable sellers with fresh vegetables which contrasted the black mortar and grime only served to highlight the will of a human being to maintain a sense of dignity even when a state can in a moment reduce people to rubble.

It is a site of power. The police are arresting those who has the termity to question or the dignity to stand up. A local woman, sitting on a charpoy outside a blackened wall and a frontless home could no longer hold her fury. "May his (Jagmohan's) grave be here. In this the park he is going to build, over the fury of the poor?." Others looked on, cynical and unspeaking.

A man was furiously digging to implant a rope peg for his makeshift tent, in a sea of rubble. Another man somewhere must have with even less effort signed a paper authorizing such destruction. How can a hand do such different things. One vested with the brutal power of the state and another with just the power to wield a hammer. What then did citizenship mean? Or nationhood?

However not to turn this into a lament, but just as a reminder that here in Yamuna Pushta is taking place a complete subjugation of what may consider human. It has so many dimensions, as also I am sure so many narratives, that encompassing all one felt and underwent in a couple of hours is impossible. While some people are trying to have those arrested bailed, or trying to raise the stoic media, or planning strategy to resist and subvert, for others just a visit to the site can be a grim reminder of the grim times which we live in. Of times which have probably remained unchanged.

ravi Agarwal [Reader-Ilist] Yamuna pushta Mon Apr 26 17:22:53 CEST 2004

A sepia-toned photograph of a beach. In the background, a large electrical transmission tower stands on a small island or pier in the water. The foreground shows the sandy beach with some debris and a dark, curved object, possibly a piece of driftwood or a log, lying on the sand. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin

# Angel of History

“A few months back, you could not have been standing where you are. It was full of people and it was filthy. Soon this will be a park, with a lake and boating on it. That is what is being dug out. This spot will be for parking cars. It is a 1700 crore rupees project.” The police post officer spoke with pride, clad in his banyan and lungi. “The river was clean earlier. Now it is dirty. All the cities muck goes into it. It will be clean once more.”

The swept and bulldozed clean landscape.

As I watched and photographed, no one objected, taking pictures was not a threat anymore. It had the sanction of the city's powerful. Not even a brick of the 5000 houses where people lived in the filth was left. But they had survived – for what was the option? Yamuna Pushta. (abode by the river Yamuna). Bulldozed overnight, almost. Razed to the ground.



April 27, 2004

Bombed. From a human settlement to clean empty bank.

New landscape.

New park. New upcoming road. New bank. No people.

Only their curses remain. Floating over the city, merged with its din. But part of the cities darkness, its black air and water. What else can it offer today?

This was Yamuna Pushta. A place which housed the largest slum settlement in the city. Over 40,000 families lived here. Along the river bank. In one fell swoop, on instructions from the Minister of Urban Affairs, one who for long had a grand vision of the city, as one with imperial vistas and cleansed of all dirt, including human beings. In a week, the place was bulldozed to the ground as if doing it slowly would have let too many public voices being raised. Crushed and reduced to dirt. In one fell swoop, as part of the grand plan to reclaim the river for the city.

Whose city? One may ask.

Was the river being cleaned of its sewage or merely the land reclaimed for the cities new powerful middle class?

There are now cranes everywhere. Massive ones, with large swinging booms. Below are the bulldozers, the kind that can

## Mamy Lines

Sunday July 31<sup>st</sup> 2005

6:20 am Yamuna, near Chaki ghat.

Prabhu Dayal. 41 Yrs. Water high today. Clear 10 Yrs ago, could see a coin on the river bed. Or filter water through a hole in the sand and drink it. Struggling to have a ghat since H.K.L. Bhagat's time. Mr. Walia promised, but nothing. Earlier washing pond near the road, submerged in 178 floods. Now this on the same bank. Mostly tent house work. Slow in summer. Every day fare.

Keela Ram. 62 Yrs. retired MCD employee. For two generations, farming in Delhi. Farm near the new Nizamuddin Bridge. Used to grow maize and jowar earlier, now mostly vegetables. Retired at 60 from MCD. Does not want to do farming. Also could see a coin on the bed of the river. River was near road, at one time. had crossed it as well. Farming mostly of vegata now, not grain. Farm land leased out for a year. 1500 rupees a bigha or so.

Sindhu Chand. Charakider for machinery for high tower to be made. Jat Regiment. Retired at 53. Now 55. In Barailly, then Assam. Free flowing liquor. Good food; really nice weather. Done gone to US for M.B.B.S. Selected from Maulana Azad Medical College



March 15, 2005

flatten tonnes of earth in hours.

Amongst the machines are labourers camps, colourful, dotted with children, and with cooking stoves in their front of their tents. A khaki dressed chowkidar strolls close by one of them, watchful, but knows not of what. Below his 'power' uniform and peaked cap, is disheveled unwashed matted hair, and the rustic tone of someone who has just come from the rural hinterland, only a few months back. Some of his 'biradari' have been cast as labourers while he has as their 'watchman.' This is always the scene, Anywhere, everywhere, all along the river bank.



The river is being transformed even as one watches.

The city is gripped in its new imagination, excited by the 'makeover,' and waiting to join the likes of London and New York.

"To be cleaned on the lines of the Thames," the Hon'ble Delhi High Court had directed.

The essence of the fish, is it "being " water.....The "essence" of the freshwater fish is the water of a river. But the latter ceases to be the "essence" of the fish and is not longer a suitable medium of existence as soon as the river is made to serve industry, as soon as it is polluted by dykes another waste products n navigate by steam boats, as soon as its water is diverted into canals where simple drainage can deprive fist of its medium of existence.

Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844

In four years will be the Commonwealth Games. Delhi has been the chosen city. Who knows what they told the world, what spin did they play out, what power point presentation was made to get the contract. But it set into motion a scheme of massive investments, transformations under 'project modernization.' The city was to get new flyovers, roads, highways, and be cleansed of all dirt – of all kind. People or things. Dhobi ghats would be replaced by laundermats, people with parks, unused canals with fast roads and the river bed itself with stadiums and cycletracks.

Delhi was to join the world map, shoulder to shoulder with the most affluent.

“The Delhi district is the central of the three districts of the Delhi division, and lies between north latitude 28 deg 12 min and 29 deg 13 min and east longitude 76 deg 51 min and 77 deg 35 min. It consists of a long narrow strip of country running along the right bank of the Jamuna.”

“It is bounded on the north by the Panipath tahsil of the Karnail district; on the east by the river Jamuna, which separates it from the Mirath and Bulandshahr districts of the North – West provinces; on the south by the Palwal tahsil...”

“The tract thus limited through exhibiting none of the beauties of mountainous districts, possesses a considerable diversity of physical feature, and in part is not wanting in picturesqueness. This it owes to the hills and to the river.”

“The hills in Delhi, though not attractive in themselves, give a pleasant view across the Jamna, and in clear weather allow, it is said even a glimpse of the Himalayas.”

“The river enters the district at a height of some 710 feet, and leaves it at about 630 feet above the level of the sea, with a course within the Delhi limits of rather over 90 miles, and an average fall of between 10 and 11 inches to the mile. The general direction is nearly due south. In the floods of the rainy season the river has a considerable breadth, swelling in places to several miles, with a maximum depth of 25 feet. In the cold weather its normal depth is said to be four feet only; the stream is only sufficient to supply the three canals which draw from it (the Eastern and Western Jamna Canal and the Agra Canal) and is then fordable in many places.”

“Melons: Melons are chiefly cultivated on the sandy soil of the river side near Delhi; the soil considered *dumat* (i.e. *do mutti*) being 2/3 earth and 1/3 sand. The cultivators are chiefly tenants, such as Mails, Kachis, Mallahs and Shaikhs, but in some places proprietors cultivate themselves.”

“Ferry: The principle traffic on this river as stated in the Punjab Famine Report, 1879 is shown in table XXV. Besides the ferries and bridges of the boats mentioned in the margin, there is a Railway Bridge at Delhi, with a road underneath for passenger and vehicles.”

(A Gazetteer of Delhi, 1883-4)

It was in keeping with India's new image as the emerging superpower, nuclear equipped, a large IT workforce, and the new tourist destination. It was part of the middle class dream of supermalls and superhighways, of fast foods and multi-channel television, of new encounters and new language, and of a new pride.

Even the morning walker I encountered regularly along the river had a giant St. Bernard, huge, imported from Canada, with long fur, panting uncontrollably in the hot humid heat!

It was truly becoming a 'flat' world.

Today the Yamuna Pushta landscape rolls out towards the river. It is dotted with debris and house foundation plinths remains, many of them barely four feet by four feet. Little shanty houses stood here, and people similar to those who are involved in the new construction lived in them. The policeman







May 13, 2004

who keeps watch over the bareness probably not very different, except perhaps from a 'higher' caste and also permanently transformed by the power of the state now vested in his physical and physiological body.

Was it not the now much maligned young Marx who had predicted that "alienation, estranges man from his own body, from nature as it exists outside him, from his spiritual essence, his human essence."

That "nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self acting mules etc. These are products of human industry, natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation of nature. They are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand, the power of knowledge objectified."

And that "the essence of the fish, is it being water.....The essence of the freshwater fish is the water of a river. But the latter ceases to be the essence of the fish and is not longer a suitable medium of existence as soon as the river is made to serve industry, as soon as it is polluted by dykes another waste products n navigate by steam boats, as soon as its water is diverted into canals where simple drainage can deprive fist of its medium of existence."

The script already seemed to have been written!

night. Jagan sona waves come and shankaras at night. Night really eerie, can hear the sound of the river. Cannot sleep. Wants to leave job only hear here for two months more. Does not like the mosquitoes and the heat in the tin shed. Cannot sleep.

Monday 1st August, 2005.

5:30 am. Yamuna Ghat.

River brim full of water. Swirling eddying water. Muddy, but not black. Anonymous conversations. Afford relations and linkages. Dealing with pragmatic self. Inside/outside connect / disconnect.

Sunder Singh. Migrant. 20's. Lifeguard. employed by Delhi Govt. for a few months a year. Walks on the banks, the bridges, watching, like a lifeguard. Part time help on ghat No 25 with Pragna for extra income. Stays familiar with all. Eats any place. Welcome in all homes on the ghat. No fear of water. Can jump in and save people. Current is not a problem. Water and river his second home. Offers ride in boat..... another time!

Bhoop Jha. Stay at ghat No 24. Came to Delhi from Bihar - Madhubani in 1988. Said water had fouled the roof of the houses on the Ghats. Pujari at Shakti Nagar, Hanuman Temple, near roundabout. Two sons, one daughter. Bihar is corrupt. Upper caste and lower caste split. Predominance of lower caste. Upper caste has lost out by creating alienation.

Cisner woman at Ghat 25. Dispute with ghat 24. Boat. Also gems and 'ghoda ki raal'. Foreigners come here she says, lots of them. Offers ride in boat.

Human beings are both products of nature and part of it. If they have a biological basis when their social existence is excluded from account (it cannot be abolished); if they are themselves the summit of nature and its products, and if they live within nature (however much they may be divided off from it by particular social and historical conditions of life and by the so-called "artistic environment") then what is surprising in the fact that human beings share in the rhythm of nature and its cycles?

Nikolai Bukharin

The river is now a thread which runs through the city. It weaves it together, as it has done for ever since the city existed, over at least a thousand years if not more. It comes down from the lofty Himalayas, descending from the ice and snow and weaves its way through the bustling capital of today one of the most populated nations in the world – Delhi. It flows on, now only as sewage, with little clean water. Every monsoon it fills up to its brim, as much as allowed by the many new up-stream water gates, writhingly swirling and eddying in a bid to break free. Every summer it gives up, drying to a trickle, opening its self to walking paths along its parched caked bed. It has many stories to tell, of itself and of those who told it theirs.

It has history. It is also history.



October 2, 2004











February 3, 2005

"The hangings were permitted and ordered by men of a ruling class who had studied the application of death throughout human history and had power to apply that knowledge. . . . Each hanging repeated the lesson: 'Respect Private Property.' . . . "

'The London Hanged' Helen Linebaugh.

1640 London 2005 Yamuna Pushya . . . . Civilisation marches on!



January 25, 2005



September 12, 2005



**CITYSTATS** | VEHICLE BOOM  
in the city has more than double  
buses has also nearly doubled

NO ONE COVERS DILLI LIKE WE DO. ALL THE NEWS IN DETAIL, DEPTH AND COLOUR

## A jazzy plan for Yamuna



- The tourism department is considering development of Yamuna river front to attract wealthy Games preparation, the project will open up the river front and making it more attractive.
- Based on a study conducted by the department, the plan makes provision for open air theatre, sports activities. The study has also suggested that there have not occurred any major accidents. Pedestrian walkway, light rail system, and a night rail system will be provided.

The plan to develop the Yamuna between two nodes between the ITO bridge and Okhla barrage

Graphic: Nishant

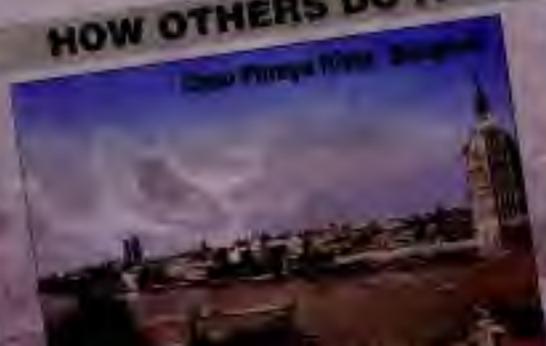
### Spare a wink

When was it that the last time you thought of the Yamuna? Every city fortunate to be set on the banks of a river celebrates this. But...

### HOW OTHERS DO IT



Potomac River, Washington



Okhla Barrage, Delhi

ed to 11.56 lakh in 2004. ...  
to 53,000 during this period.

# the ina

## Teeing off at Yamuna: Not such a distant dream after all

By Nidhi Sharma/TNN

New Delhi: After Akshardham temple and an athletes' village, Delhi is eyeing more of the Yamuna flood plain.

Commonwealth Games 2010 could mean a different river front for Delhi. Imagine a good game of golf at a bank. Or just a leisurely walk or a quiet evening watching a play in the open-air amphitheatre. Maybe a boat ride?

The tourism department is considering a proposal for developing the river front for the Commonwealth Games. In presentations made before the Games' Federation members and Delhi chief secretary, the department has shown its interest in a re-development plan. The plan is to develop different zones of the river as per flood cycles. A report prepared by National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), which has 25 zones with 25 flood cycles, has formed the basis of the proposal.

According to the plan, that show a 25-year return period will be developed with pathways.

However, the plan also includes flood protection measures like green spaces, wetlands, etc. The plan also includes a 15-year return period.

The Games' Federation has asked that all construction and other sports facilities be done within the development plan. It has also asked that the plan be approved by the government.

ring a model for partial  
. As a part of Common-  
proposal aims at developing  
accessible to people  
d by NEERI, the plan is to  
s and water-based  
as in different zones  
red in 50 years  
ootpaths, cycle pathways,  
tem and boats will be allowed  
ver front. Flood plain will be  
re and cultural  
e allowed while the  
in 100-year



"We say that Disneyland is not, of course, the  
sanctuary of the imagination, but Disneyland as  
hyperreal world masks the fact that all America  
is hyperreal, all America is Disneyland...."  
Jean Baudrillard



# Facing the Past

I visit and revisit the river, carrying my story with me and trying to hear its. As I try and reconnect to what seems like an eons old connection, the waters merge, and many layers of my life and lifetimes flatten into one fathomless but complete whole.

But there are many others who seemed to have discovered this much earlier. Many fragments. Many lives, who live along it.

Many livelihoods.

Washermen who beat heavy cotton tents and table cloths on the water's bank after steaming them in boiling urns, and

pounding them with their feet to splay the dirt out. Only, to dip them back in the black waters of the river.

Or boatmen, who ferry vegetables and people across the bank.

Or serve as part time priests chanting mantras, as they provide rides to those carrying ashes of the dead to help them immerse them into midstream waters. They know well the Vedic chants which have to be cited along with the ceremony, and there is no need for hiring a 'real' priest for those who cannot afford to. Death can cost money.

Sometimes they are lifeguards. They can dive to the river's depths without fear, keeping watch over the bathing pilgrims. Even the British recruited them to do so. Tanned, with almost black, sinewed strong bodies. Yet wiry and lean. They each have proud stories to tell of bravery.

I wander and meander. Each time as the city receded, the self emerges. What is it about the city that it forces one to seek silent corners? What is it about the flowing waters, however black, that it provides such quietude?

I visit the river. Repeatedly. Seeking solace.

From what?



August 24, 2004



November 12, 2005



Each visit compulsive, in the wee early hours of the morning or late in the evening. The river draws me as it flows. Often I just sit there, watching.

Looking. Absorbed.

Unmindful of the piles of work on my desk. Often twice or thrice a week. A personal crisis which started from my self, but really extended beyond, even to my existence in the city. A city with multilayered and fragmented geographies which no map could really capture. My life was to-work. Home.

Back to work.

To one friend and then to another. To a concert. Then to a play.

Back to work.

This vast city with so many people. Where every driver on the road seems rude, and every salesman in a shop dismissive. The city I grew up in. An alien. Outsider.

No space now seems mine.

The city, impersonal, and distant, and unwelcoming.

Near upcoming powerhouse. River full. Rope trolley gone. Thatched shack at the far end. Waded through swamp and heavy soft silt. Sucked deep inside - squelchy! All muddily... caeked. Cleansed myself on the river. The river finally touch after two years. Will it take the pain away? the constant pain... the loneliness.

Dhivan Kumar from Bihar. 16 yrs old. Here for two years. Farm hand. 65/- per day. Is against 10 working for a park cleaning contractor at Panvana Kila. In class pass. What is his future? Lifelong labour?

The road is broken. A mess. From the trucks ferrying stuff for the upcoming powerhouse. The river still brings in loads of silt. Probably very fertile and very good for the crops.

August 28, 2005. Behind Tibetan Market. Ghos 2. Brahmin women. Here since 30 years. Sleep on the woman's ghat. Both have a plot to manage grown up here. Yamuna as pure as a 'moti' in the 1930s. Water came up several feet. Took many days to rebuild the ghat after the monsoons. 16 ft of sand over the steps.

Uma Shankar Sharma. Dine 1924; fourth generation. Also a life saver. Story about a woman who came to commit suicide and then was persuaded otherwise. Good swimmer. Can take the boat both ways. Upto 170 bridge and upto Wazirabad, and if gates at 170 bridge open, then upto Okhla.

Register. Where he keeps a record of people saved. A monkey at the four pillar fountain.

“The division of the Khadar and Bangar was doubtless caused by the erratic wandering of the Jamna from its ancient bed. The river enters the district at a height of some 710 feet, and leaves it at about 630 feet above the level of the sea, with a course within the Delhi limits of rather over 90 miles, and an average fall of between 10 and 11 inches to the mile. The general direction is nearly due south. In the floods of the rainy season the river has a considerable breadth, swelling in places to several miles, with a maximum depth of some 25 feet. In the cold weather its normal depth is said to be four feet only; the stream is only sufficient to supply the three canals which draw from it (the Eastern and the Western Jamna, and the Agra Canal) and is then fordable in many places. The banks of the river are generally low, and the bed sandy, but there is said to be a bed of firm rock under the site of the Agra Canal weir at Okhla.

Religious reverence is due to the Jamna from the Hindu, though in a less degree than to the Ganges. It passes close under the Fort at Delhi, and it must always have rounded the eastern point of the rocky “ Ridge ” at Wazirabad: but in the northern part of the district it appears formerly to have had a course much to the west of that which it holds at present. The drainage channel, called the *Budhi Nala* which comes down under the very doors of Sonapat, would seem by the conformation of the country to have been the old bed of the Jamna and this is supported by strong and general tradition. The course of the Budhi marks off the division of the country into Khadar and Bangar. The Khadar, which, as might be supposed, lies low, may be defined as the soil which at some time or other lay either under the river or to the east of it: an interesting evidence of this is elongated slip-like shapes of most of the eastern Bangar villages: they evidently abutted on the river and part of their areas is made up of the Khadar land deserted by it. But east of this again the land is slightly higher, also favoring the theory of a sudden change to the east. The Bangar in old times lay immediately to the west of the stream, and the ascent of the old bank is in most places plainly visible. How or when the river changed its course is not known; but there seems some probability that the change was a violent rather than a gradual one. The physical conformation above alluded to favors this; while some countenance is also given to it by the fact that the shapes of the village areas in the Khadar do not at all suggest a gradually elongating boundary as would probably be the case had the river gradually receded.

Where every familiar place was unfamiliar, and becoming increasingly so.

Like always the camera became the cocoon and the this time the river the womb. It did not ask or question, it just gave. Many many years ago the sea had done similar things in Mumbai. Flowing water had this thing in it. It was a living thing, it could talk back and also let one be.

The river became life itself and the people who lived along it came alive.

Isolating, unable to go out on roads, the noise the traffic, the impersonal, the harshness and the aggressive rudeness, that one comes back bristling. The need for greenery, trees, the sound of birds chirping, the sky, just a space without sound, some sharing, real sharing, not a ‘product’ of ideas, but the intangible, the fragile the unsaid, the fleeting feeling.

How does one find it?

The struggle of relationships, the pain of breakups, the loss of the self, trying to regain ones centre, the new age meditation, the belief in another self, osho, ravi shanker, incense, the escape, the wordy logic of philosophies, sufi, music. The touch. The lack of a caress.

The isolation.



February 5, 2006



November 23, 2005

The river. Flowing. Still. Ever-present. The sandy bank.

No buildings. The water, continuously flowing, mesmerizing, centering, like a focused thought, deeply inwardly drawing. The waters. Something about them.

Timeless.

From another space, the knowledge that they have been in so many places, traveled so far, from the Himalayas, have been in clouds, on the Indian ocean, over the planet, snow, ice, the same water traveling down. So deep. Unfathomable. Like where one loses one self. Swirling, immersing.

Dissolving.

Another dimension, beyond the material, beyond the earth, where consciousness loses bearing.

Where breath is taken away. Where life takes over.

The sweat of toiling bodies. The sickle of the farmer, the phawada of the laborer, the sinew tanned oily body of the boatman, the dexterous beating of the cloth of the washer man, the unbelievable faith of the pujari. The impish smile of children. The bond of labouring families. Little kids as boat 'men.' The improvised floating platforms. The dhobi ghats, with tubs and stones worn from the beating of cloth. The morning

from there, is stationed. Many attempts to restrain him have failed, including tranquilising him. When the waters rise, he just drinks up. Eats whatever is provided.

Pappu ka ghat, Bansarsi ghat, Anyani ghat. Local narratives and local stories abound.

September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

Yamuna Rista landscape, along with Sveta, I leave 6:15 am. Sunday.

Conversation with officer at the police post... wearing a 'banyan' and a 'lingi'...

"A few months back you could not have been standing here, it was filthy. Soon this will be a park; with boating on a lake. That is being dug out. This spot will be parking for cars. It is a 1700 crore super project."

The river was clean earlier. Now it is dirty. All the city's mud goes into it. It will be clean once more.

Conversation with grass cutting woman.

"We live nearby, and are cleaning the field before we start cultivating it once more. The tractor is levelling the land. This is full of plastics, which jam the tractor. We have to remove this by hand. Actually, the place where people have been relocated is much better. We stayed here for some time. Except for the livelihood. There is no work. So we came back. We don't actually have lease on this land, but they have said we can cultivate here. It is better for us. But there was a whole city here, those who have been displaced

walkers. The stare – ers, who just sit and stare at the water endlessly. The more determined yogis, breathing pranyayams and contorting into asanas. The river, the people who live on and off it.

The water. Dirty, black.

Filthy. Sewage. Outcome and outfall of industry and the city.

Peoples' filth. Somewhere roots in consumption, in production, in our economy. Labour, use, machinery, industry. Fish alienated from water. Nature become a dumping ground.

A garbage dump. Take clean water and dump filth. The river. Dirty, outcome of our modern systems, our modern age.

Isolating.

Dirt alienates.

Cleanliness connects.

You cannot jump in a dirty river.

Vegetables, marigold, maize, fodder- jowar. All grow on the banks. Families work. Own land. Lease land. The river nurtures and sustains. Changing.

Roads. Powerhouses. New parks. New pipelines.

Bulldozers. Cranes. Hot mix plants. Concrete slabs prefabricated for the cities flyovers. Mud tracks. Dogs.

Fields, marsh. Modernity. Changing city. All the river.

Still the river.

I search. Some roots.

To the water. To the soil. To the sweat. The toil draws me.

I speak to the toiling people. Those who have touched the river. Those who have seen it change. Seen it clean and now dirty. Seen it without the roads and flyovers. See the machines on them today. They have no idea why. No one has told them. No one has asked them.

The river, the experience of it.

The floods. Its changing moods.

Its sounds at night. Its swirling and its stagnation.

My drawing to it. Again and again.

With my camera. But with myself. My struggle with the self.

My search for nature. My search for a connect. To something I do not know or understand. To speak to life. To see death. To see beyond. To know. But know not what to know, or what knowledge I seek. To go beyond. To be immersed into the swirling waters.

To drown. To reconnect. To end my isolation.

But I know not how.

Except to walk and sit on its banks. To take pictures. To feel. To be. Just to be.

My life. The river. What do I do? What do I create? What should I shoot. What do I connect to? Merge. Jump in the waters. Immersion.

How I have to hold myself back.....

Relief! The visit to the river being completed, there is release.

For some time. For a while.

Then it builds up again, and another visit to the river is due. Repetitively.

Time and again. Cyclically. Again and again.



December 12, 2005



Abinasion .....

fish from water - polluted waters?  
man from nature - capitalism?  
me from myself - ?

'Fifty' ways to get to the river  
"Don't take a bus - gas  
just take a walk - and be sure"

Okla. bridge side → take a left toward escoria's road  
past canal, cross a narrow bridge over the canal & then  
reverse speed breakers later, take a right from the road name  
and go on there

off San's bridge on sand ... take a left toward the  
new upcoming power plant and down stages of the mud  
bank. the bank will 'dip' out at the river. where  
the vegetable water ferry is

from 170 bridge :: take a left after crossing 170  
bridge on the road parallel to the river there are  
several roads, many of which are closed take  
any to new construction there walk down them on  
the "right" side till you come to the river.  
or before the bridge turn left on a road  
after the "elephants live here" sign and walk along in  
fact will lead opposite the 170 power house into  
plant area fields on the river

there are several interesting walks near bridge  
near the 170 bridge behind the Sabalón market  
also along where former power plant was earlier. This  
evolved to the former bridge which is now  
being converted into a "paved" bridge. We can  
also go on a couple of kilometers opposite  
Mangrove forest, till the course to the river. There  
one can walk along it is several former  
reservoirs



January 29, 2006



March 15, 2006





October 14, 2005



October 15, 2004





# Ravi Agarwal

Born in 1958, Ravi Agarwal is a photographer and environmentalist who lives and works in New Delhi. For several years, he has been exploring, through the medium of photography, issues relating to the personal and social, in the mode of documentary essays shooting 'street', 'labour' and 'work.' Alongside, he works as an environmental activist as founder and Director of one of India's leading environmental non-profit organisations, Toxics Link ([www.toxicslink.org](http://www.toxicslink.org)).

## Solo Shows

- 2000** *Down and Out*, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India  
The Hutheesingh Visual Arts Gallery, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India  
National Vakbondsmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
[www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/downandout/](http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/downandout/)
- 1995** *A Street View*, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi

## Selected Curated Shows/ Group Exhibitions

- 2006** *The Monsoon Chapter*, Alliance Francaise, New Delhi
- 2005** *Self x Social*, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jahawahar Lal Nehru University, New Delhi
- 2004** *The Making of India*, Shamat, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
- 2003** *Crossing Generations – DiVERGE: Forty years of Gallery Chemould*, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai
- 2002** *Documenta 11*, Kassel, Germany
- 1996** *2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial of Creative Photography*, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
- 1995** *First National Exhibition of Photography*, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
- 1995** *Shaman, Postcards for Gandhi*, Wadhera Art Gallery, New Delhi; also Bombay, Bangalore, and Madras, India
- 1993** *Bombay Natural History Society photo exhibition*, Bombay, India

## Photographic Books and Catalogues

- Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*; Oxford University Press, New Delhi and University Press, Amsterdam, 2000
- Making a Difference: A collection of essays*; ed. Rukmani Shekhar, Spic-Macay, New Delhi, 1998
- Portfolios in *The India Magazine*, 1995 and 1997
- Portfolio in *First City* magazine, 2003
- Monthly visual column in *First City* magazine, since February 2005

## Selected Publications

1. *Standardised, Packaged, Ready for Consumption*, Sarai Reader 05 Bare Acts, Sarai Media Labs, Delhi, 2005
2. *Resisting Technology, regaining a personal ecology*, Sarai Reader 03: *Shaping Technologies*, 2003
3. *Beyond environmental standards: from techno-centric to people-centric environmental governance*. *Troubled Times, Sustainable Development and Governance in the Age of Extremes*, SDPI, Islamabad, 2006.
4. *Corporate Social Responsibility: a critical perspective from India* *Cosmetische humanisering?* Ed Tonja van den Ende et al, Humanistics Univeristy Press, Amsterdam, 2005



August 16<sup>th</sup> 2005

6:00 am - Even bank (take film)  
+ BR'S

10:00 Medical waste team meeting  
(film for processing) / discuss  
report structure

12:30 field visit to G'puri for seeing  
waste collection

5:30 HC - film

- Remind A about 'water book' - email  
j about meeting.

- see contacts. / dinner at 8pm