

Ecologising the 'Human'

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Nature and urban spaces seem to be contradictory terms. They cannot somehow coexist. Like chalk and cheese, nature is 'disorder' while cities are 'order.' However most major cities have rivers running through them, and which in fact precede them.

Delhi has its Yamuna. It is not merely a water flow, but a cultural space, where imaginations of modernity and tradition are intricately interwoven. The river can be measured as much in terms of its water quality, as its godliness. Both pollution measuring devices as well as pilgrims can be found on its banks. These divergent interactions do not sit very easily with each other and can be contradictory. For example when the river is seen as 'mother,' it is also seen as 'pure,' even as its water is visibly and heavily polluted. The river is not considered the 'material' body, but an 'essence' which lies within it. If it is pure then where is the need to clean its waters? Hence it is not unusual to see believers dip into the river's dark sludge every day.

On the other hand, another knowledge system informs us of a complex wetland ecology and bird life on the river and its flood plains. It also tells us of the irreplaceable water reservoirs of the flood plains and how groundwater is recharged through its sandy soil. Here the river is an ecosystem which interacts with hydrology, fluid dynamics, soil mechanics, geophysics, biology and ornithology in manners so complex that it is still being fully discovered.

A third set of underlying interactions which hover unseen over the river, are institutional, political and economic. For example, since the beginning of the nineteenth century nature has been institutionalized and controlled in terms of its functionality. Hence while the riverbank belongs the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the river's water is controlled by the Flood and Irrigation Department. One agency controls the land use on the river front, and the other tries to ensure that the water stays within its bounds. However the land-water boundary needs to be unambiguous for this to function. Bound territories can be valued, owned and sold. Unbound ones are disputed. The river complicates matters. It floods its banks each monsoon, and what was land becomes river bed. This un-demarcated and hard to define space becomes 'unmanageable,' by either of the above bodies as the boundaries become blurred literally. Straight jacketing the river, or ecology in general, is a hard if not impossible task, but cities keep trying it since they need to be planned, precise, orderly, and function like clockwork.

Hence Master plans and land use plans have to be drawn and re-drawn, in an attempt to cope.

Recently a faith based organisation - the Art of Living Foundation - played in the interstices of these ambiguities to controversially holds a three day cultural event on 1500 acres of the fragile floodplains of the Yamuna. With a promise to show the people of Delhi 'Jannat,' (heaven), it used the uncertainty of land use, and political clout to obtain clearances from the DDA. It evoked the river as Goddess to raise the event beyond city to Cosmos, (and hence out of human questioning) and resorted to science by offering to introduce biological agents like 'enzymes' into the river, as a way to address the river as a physical body. It labeled anyone opposing the event as 'asura shakti,' (evil force), or anti-national,' depending on the belief - god or nation - of the target audience. When the evidence based judiciary questioned the event, the AOL projected itself as larger than it, by refusing to pay the fine, claiming 'nothing wrong had been done.' It played politics, power, religion, morality, science and even nationalism to fulfill its ends. Only the river suffered the aftermath in the form of garbage, structures and roads made of debris. Nature and river were forgotten, farmers were displaced, and one was reminded that Godliness cannot be easily questioned. It was a stark reminder of the power of faith, and its ambiguous relationship to ecology.

Today, scientists state that the ecological future of the planet is in the collective hands of the human race, as it now has geological agency, though some within it have more power than others. New realizations show that our cartesian dualism with nature has been silently influencing resource use, migrations, conflicts, landscapes, boundaries, social relationships, culture, livelihoods and technology choices etc. The distinction between natural history and human history is collapsing, and everything must be questioned, and reformulated, and all Gods reinvented. With the idea of the 'human' becoming central, a sustainable and equitable future will require its reconstitution on a more ethical and ecological ground.