



# YAMUNA. ELBE: CONTEMPORARY FLOWS, FLUID TIMES

(AN ART, ECOLOGY AND SCIENCE SEMINAR TO RE-IMAGINE  
COMMON GLOBAL QUESTIONS CONFRONTING RIVERS.)

Ravi Agarwal

What do two old cities sited on riverbanks, and separated by thousands of kilometers, have in common? Seemingly not much, even though it is possible to imagine trade through the ancient port of Hamburg on the river Elbe, ultimately reaching the royal courts in Delhi via the river Yamuna. Today, however, as the world becomes 'instant' through cyberspace transfers of ideas and money, they are bound more closely by common questions confronting global capital and its relationship with local ecologies. Both Hamburg and Delhi, are built on rivers, and have found prosperity through them. However, in their own ways, the rivers

have also been the source of layered cultures and mythologies. Both rivers, based in flood plains, are today facing challenges, including those posed by climate change. While the estuarine Elbe ebbs and falls by over 3.5 m twice each day, it silts its shipping channel rapidly, and the Yamuna which floods once each year, trickles as a sewer through the densely populated capital city rest of the time.

In the times we live in, rivers are increasingly being controlled for 'usage.' Global technology and capital is proposed as the way forward, and ideas of 'relationships' and 'ecology' are

submerged. Should the river in Hamburg be deepened to allow larger ships in, and for the port to stay globally competitive? Or should the Yamuna flood plains in Delhi be embanked and urbanized, the river cleaned and channelized, to provide a 'view' for the proposed expensive housing on its banks?

Answering these questions is not easy, as cities expand and become economic growth and contemporary culture centers. Underlying are omnipresent questions about our relationship with 'nature' per se. Should rivers not they be just allowed to be, and flow, irrespective of their utility? Where does sustainability

lie? What are the ways of thinking of cities, rivers, ecosystems and technology? This question cannot be answered any longer through the confines of any one disciplinary methodology, but needs artists, activists and scientists to collide, cooperate, co-imagine, to take us out of the crisis.

To attempt this, the Max Muller Bhavan hosted a 2 day multi-practice seminar in Delhi on the 11th and 12th of December 2010, conceptualized by Ravi Agarwal, artist and environmentalist. The seminar is also first in a series of events leading to a public art festival, co curated by Ravi Agarwal and Till Krause (artist from Hamburg), which will be held simultaneously in Hamburg and Delhi in October/November 2010, on the theme of the 'River.'

The seminar had two underlying objectives:

The first was to re-examine the ways of thinking of ecology today. In his opening remarks, Ravi Agarwal recalled Solvay Zizek, who identifies the ecological crisis as one of the four signs of the limits of capitalism. "The nature of the risks involved in ecology fundamentally precludes a market condition.... For the first time in human history the act of a single social or political agent can alter or even alter or even interrupt the entire global historical process... we cannot predict the consequences of our acts"

He added that it is widely believed in India that the solutions to the ecological crisis lie in the technology of the west. Along with technology come frameworks of knowledge and their relationship with

embedded ideas of man and nature. The alteration of ecological systems has never been the domain of weak powerless individuals. These have always been attempted by those who can and have the power to do so. It is not by chance that the royal forts on the banks of rivers have now been replaced by high-end real estate today. The new capital is the old feudal. The idea of equity and democracy are deeply interlaced with the idea of ecology. This is true whether we speak of waste, forest destructions, or rivers.

The second objective was to help create a broader context for the production of art, which speaks to ideas of ecology, as well as to help open up new ways of imagining rivers through the works of artists as well as of scientists and activists.

## The Seminar

The seminar sought to break out of the gridlocks of disciplinary practices, by approaching it from multiple perspectives. The four panels spread over 2 days, had a mixture of technologists, activists, artists and policy makers outlining their approaches, to break rigidities and help open up space for new questions to be raised.

The four panels were proposed as binary provocations. The first, A 'view' of the river – technology/ecology was chaired by Prof. Shekhar Singh (Coordinator, National Campaign for Right to Information), with Dr. Regina Dubey (Urban specialist, GTZ India), R.K. Garg, Member Planning, Delhi Jal Board, Mr. Manoj Mishra (Activist and Coordinator, Jamunaji Jiye Abhiyan) and Atul Bhalla-Artist, as speakers.

The session explored the different approaches to a river ranging from the technological to the ecological. While the scientists and policy makers laid out the plans for cleaning the river and its connection to the issues of city sanitation, river activist Manoj Mishra surprised everyone by revealing that the river waters of the Yamuna have been diverted almost 100 km upstream of Delhi and in reality the river does not even exist. Atul Bhalla presented a poetic rendering of his photogrpahic work "Yamuna Walk," done in 2007, unearthing the landscape of the river, narrated along with words. The walk was also visually available through an installation of over 160 photographs which surrounded the Max Muller Bhavan.

The second panel, The River and the City – separate/connected was chaired by Prof. K.T Ravindran (Chairman Delhi Urban Arts Commission and Head of Urban Design, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi), with Prof. Shekhar Shashank (Head, Dept of Geology, Delhi University), Dr. Elizabeth Kloke (Scientist, Ministry of Nature, Hamburg), Sheba Chhachhi (Artist) and Mr. Amar Kanwar (Artist), as speakers.

This session, explored the various relationships of the city with the river and how the river forms the city itself. Dr Kloke outlined the complex ecological relationship the Elbe has with the city of Hamburg and asserted that this even now was poorly understood. Dr Shahsank who has done seminal work on the issue of groundwater and the river's floodplain spoke about this critical factor, which is missed when ideas of

An art, ecology and science seminar to re-imagine common global questions confronting rivers, Seminar, Max Muller Bhavan, New Delhi, 2010





Photographs of Atul Bhalla from Yamuna Walk Series, 2007-2008

the river's channelization are proposed. Sheba Chhachhi presented her wide body of work based on the river Yamuna's deep mythological connections with the city, while Amar Kanwar reflected on the issues of lack of governance, transparency and corruption in decisions about the river's future are being taken.

The third panel, held on the second day, Reclaiming the river - poetics/politics was chaired by Sheba Chhachhi, with Sohail Hashmi (water historian), Prof. Amita Bavaskar (Sociologist, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi University), Navjot Altaf (Artist), Sonal Jain and Mriganka Madhukaillaya (Artists from the Periferry project of the Desire Machine Collective) and Vivan Sundaram (Artist), as speakers.

This session, which had a majority of the speakers who were artists. It began with Sohail Hashmi's retracing of the multiple types of water channels and systems which connected the river Yamuna and the many past cities of Delhi, and which had now mindlessly been destroyed, covered or lost. Dr Bavaskar raised issues of equity and pollution and the bias of the legal system against the poor who lived along the riverside, while artists from the Desire Machine Collective presented their project "Periferry" an artists's space for interaction which is located on a boat on the banks of the Brahmaputra. Navjot Altaf showed through a short film and

spoken text, her ongoing work exploring the destruction of the Mithi river in Mumbai, which she is doing along with an environmentalist, while Vivan Sundaram projected a short film about his "Flotage," an evocative floating sculpture made of plastic water bottles (for the public arts project, 48 deg C held in New Delhi in 2009), as it sailed down the Yamuna before being finally recycled.

The fourth panel, The Future of the river Free/Bound was chaired by Ravi Agarwal, with Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabratta Sengupta (artists, Raqs Media Collective), Till Krause (artist and curator), Mr. Himanshu Thakkar (water activist with the South Asian) and Julia Dautel (Ministry of Culture, Hamburg), as speakers.

The final panel was a place for reflection and thinking of the future of where we seem to be heading. The Raqs Media Collective members created a framework of ideas of thinking of this moment as one of collision and creation, drawing upon an analogy of a high speed particle accelerator, while Himanshu Thakkar outlined the many dams which were being proposed upstream of the Yamuna



and the Ganga, and what they would do to the river waters downstream. Till Kraus laid out a "free river zone" on the river Elbe, for the Hamburg portion of the public art project while Julia Dautel outlined the ideas that the city of Hamburg is the Green Capital of Europe in 2011.

## Outcomes:

It became apparent from the discussions over the two days that the mixed panels not only provided new ways of imagining river ecologies, but also allowed scientists and engineers to raise questions, which normally would not find space to be asked in mono-disciplinary conversations. The seminar will also lead to a small publications and a website, both as a resource for the upcoming public art project but also as a way of deepening the conversation on the practice of art and ecology.