



A river and the riverfront: Delhi's Yamuna as an in-between space



Awadhendra Sharan *

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29, Rajpur Road, Delhi 110054, India

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 23 January 2015

Keywords:

Yamuna
Pollution
River
Nature
Sustainability
Planning

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the presence of Yamuna in the city of Delhi, from two perspectives: (i) understanding riverscapes as simultaneously aquatic and terrestrial and (ii) understanding these as conjoining issues of environment and technology. With events over the course of the last century as its backdrop, the essay focuses on the last few decades of the twentieth century, to examine the relation of land and river in Delhi; the interface of people and projects, especially the issue of slums; and the risks posed to the river on account of waste and pollution. All these featured prominently in the events leading up to the staging of the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in October 2010, which provides the most immediate context for this essay. In conclusion, I propose that the current strategies of rejuvenating the river are limited, often anti-poor and far from sustainable.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade and more, Delhi has aspired to transit from a 'walled city' to a 'world city'.¹ In the process, it attempted, or at least its elite groups endeavoured, to reshape spatial arrangements, community life and eco-scapes to suit the tastes and desires of its more globalized populations. Transnational flows of capital meshed with international design to create new landscapes of culture and consumption (Brosious, 2010), work and habitation (Bhan, 2009; Dupont, 2008), media and technology (Sundaram, 2011) and new circuits of waste and commodities (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011). The arrival of this new state of affairs was most prominently announced in the recently concluded Commonwealth Games, one which the ruling elite of the city self-consciously advertised as the 'coming of the Indian urban age'.² India's (and Delhi's) largest spectacle to date, the Commonwealth Games, much like spectacular events elsewhere, was a means to brand the city and to manufacture solidarities around an urban place 'by imbuing it with an affective charge, a structure of feeling that is generated by the scale, compression and celebratory content of the event itself' (Baviskar, 2011b).

The river Yamuna too figured in the making of this global brand, most notably in the construction of the 'village' on the 'floodplains' of the river to house the participating athletes of the commonwealth nations. Popular accounts of the river's present and futures, in print and electronic media, often referenced them via London's Thames, albeit with a difference – just as the Thames was once polluted and dying, so was the Yamuna in our own times; similar to the ways in which the Thames was cleaned up and made tourist friendly not too long ago, so would the Yamuna be cleaned and made attractive in the not so distant future!³ Delhi's present, the argument would suggest, merely mimicked London's past; its future was already contained in the metropolitan present.⁴ However, even before the river could be rejuvenated, and the water made less polluted, its floodplains had begun to attract builders and developers, eager to construct shining new structures – the games village aside, a temple came up on one bank and a station for the passengers of the metro rail, Delhi's latest world class

³ The latest in this series of river boosting news declares that the residents of Delhi would be able to swim in the waters of the Yamuna, and also use it for drinking purposes, no later than by 2017! 'Hope to drink from river by 2017, says JICA's chief representative to India,' *The Times of India*, October 30, 2014.

⁴ In his study on domesticating electricity in the late 19th and early 20th century, Graeme Goode makes a distinction between discovering a future and constructing one. Though Goode himself does not dwell on this distinction, I think this is a valuable insight for examining the teleological impulse of infrastructural and developmental projects in the global South, where futures are posited more as discoveries than as autonomous constructions. See, Graeme Goode, *Domesticating Electricity: Technology, Uncertainty and Gender, 1880–1914*, London, Pickering and Chatto, 2008, p. 128.

* Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29, Rajpur Road, Delhi 110054, India. Tel.: +91 11 23942199; fax: +91 11 23943450.

E-mail address: sharan@csds.in.

¹ This was the theme of a major campaign run by *The Times of India*, India's leading English language newspaper.

² The Commonwealth Games were held in October 2010.

infrastructure, on the other!

Yet 'Dilli', the city of deep history and contemporary migratory flows, of insecure habitations and cramped work spaces, persisted, in its physical form as much as in its social imaginary. Even as the Yamuna riverfront was being manipulated to house high-end residential complexes and the city's largest public bus depot, there were ceaseless disputes and opposition to grand projects. On the one hand, the persistence of these contrarian voices could be indicative of the last gasp of subaltern populations and marginal spaces before the city is even more fully gentrified through its imbrications in the global order; on the other, they may be suggestive of a more complex and contested future, where Capital must negotiate the Ecological and the Political to produce more layered and in-between spaces.

This essay seeks to mark the presence of Yamuna in the city of Delhi as an in-between space to highlight the different dimensions of the changes mentioned above. Towards this we suggest first the importance of recognizing 'the river' as both land and water, for at issue is not only the future flow of the river itself but also of the status of the floodplains adjacent to the riverbed. This is a matter simultaneously of aesthetics, of the realization of economic value, and of the conservation of nature, all combining in what is an ecological transition zone, between the aquatic and the terrestrial (Lübken, 2012). Second, there is a need to recognize that the river partakes both of nature and culture. It is a humanly impacted artefact but also contains its own properties, such as its propensity to flood during the monsoon rains, which on the one hand limits what may be possible by way of channelizing its flow, and on the other hand is productive of technological transformations such as the building of a series of embankments. In other words, rivers, Yamuna included, are best imagined as envirotechnical systems, with technology and nature completely infused with each other (Pritchard, 2013). Finally, the Yamuna's in-between status as it flows through Delhi is evident in the different valuations of its potentialities – its availability for consumption in the here and now and simultaneously its struggle to survive in the present and into the future. At various points over the last century, the relationship that the Yamuna has borne with the city of Delhi has been subject to material and symbolic transformations, as it has shifted course and been built over. Today, yet again, the river and the riverfront are rather interestingly poised between those who refuse to grant them an integrity of their own – and instead consider these as property like many other, available for 'public purpose' as much as 'private profit' – and those for whom the river has a natural flow and whose links with the city must be muted and sustainable, with the floodplains remaining available for channelizing excess water during the monsoons and for augmenting the city's groundwater resources. The river, the slum dwellers, the urban elite and the public authorities all covet the same parcels of land on either bank, as floodplain, as a fragile site for informal housing, as spaces for constructing monumental buildings, and for building public infrastructure. In the conflicts and negotiations around this multiply situated, in-between space, we may glean the possible futures of the city into the twenty first century.

2. Yamuna: river and the riverfront

Delhi's Yamuna lost much of her voluminous, playful presence some centuries ago, first to the Western Yamuna Canal built in the 14th century by Firuz Shah Tughlaq, the Sultan of Delhi, to enable irrigation, and thus cultivation, in the largely barren lands surrounding it; yet again in the 1830s when the Eastern Yamuna canal was built for similar purposes by the British; and even more recently by the barrages built at Dakpathar and Hathni Kund/Tajewala, upstream of Delhi, all of this cumulatively resulting in

Delhi receiving no more than 10 percent of the water of the river (Haberman, 2006). And yet, the river has also been integral to the city's life for over a century. Towards the closing years of the 19th century, when wells began to fail as sources of drinking water, the river emerged as the chief source of water for domestic purposes.⁵ As much of this water that flowed into the city also had to find an outlet somewhere, either on land or in a water body, the Yamuna also served as the city's sink. Little risk attached to this flow of wastewater into the river in the first decades of the twentieth century; on the contrary, there was much debate between officials from Delhi and from the neighbouring United Provinces, about which state had greater claims on the wastewater which was potentially a valuable resource for agricultural purposes. If there was an element of risk, it was to human health, on account of villagers along the banks at the tail end of the river consuming the dirty water directly from it without adequate filtration (Sharan, 2014). Concomitantly, the riverside also became available as a new terrestrial resource with land being reclaimed from it to set up a modern power plant, even as the same plant began to pose new threats of water and air pollution (Government of India, 1936).

For much of this history, the Yamuna also informed the aesthetics of Delhi's built spaces. Narayani Gupta, the city's foremost historian, describes the beauty of the Faiz nahar (Faiz canal) as its waters flowed through the central streets of traditional Delhi (Gupta, 1981). In time, the canal dried up, but the riverfront still excited the urban imagination. A plan for developing the riverfront was first proposed in 1913, around the time of the inaugural of Delhi as the new capital city of India.⁶ The scheme of river improvement and water treatment, the plan drawn up for the new capital mentioned, was intended to provide for an improved and healthier river frontage from Wazirabad on the north (near where the river entered Delhi) to a point below Indrapat (where it exited on the south) (Delhi Town Planning Committee, 1913). In addition, the town planning committee believed such a scheme would add considerably to the attraction of the new capital and therefore deserved full support as 'an important step towards the complete eventual development and embellishment of Delhi.' This aesthetic enjoyment was echoed in the mention of the 'wonders' of the new capital by the poet Akbar Allahbadi around the same time:

I too saw Delhi
 Whatever I saw, it was nice
 Saw the shores of the Yamuna
 The clean beautiful ghats (platform/steps leading to a river) of
 the river
 Saw the mightiest of the Lords
 The Duke of Connaught himself! (Allahabadi, 2002)

And in the last years of colonial rule, Ahmed Ali, writing his elegy to elite Muslim way of life that was fast disappearing from the city of Delhi, provided more prosaic descriptions, of occasional walks to the river and flying kites in the monsoon weather (Ali, 2007).

These urban imaginations survived the partition of the city and the nation, and the violence that accompanied it, in August 1947 (Pandey, 2001). The Interim General Plan for Delhi, roughly a decade after India's independence, thus suggested the development of the river front for a multitude of recreational activities including playgrounds, swimming pools, fishing areas, bathing ghats, and beaches, along lines that were not so much different from the colonial plans for the riverfront as their elaboration (Town

⁵ Delhi State Archives (DSA), *Water Supply Delhi*. Box No. 51/70, W2, Commissioner's Office, 1894.

⁶ Prior to this, Calcutta had served as the capital of British India.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5048170>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5048170>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)