

Editorial Note

One of the infrastructural growth and development markers is beautification of public spaces, resources and landscape—a beautification that only satiates the eyes of the privileged few in urban India. ‘Beautification’ of public spaces and resources, I say, is displacement, exclusion and rewriting of histories by the dominant.

The river, as a public resource and as part of the urban scape, is also becoming an object to beautify, “restore and preserve” as the state sees fit. Who is this preservation and restoration for? Not for the indigenous and migrants. The river-city relationship, as in many Indian cities, is centred around the idea of beautification where the river bank and floodplains are built up, concretised and converted into public spaces exclusively for those inhabitants who pay heavy taxes. If you are the urban privileged, then the river promenades, “cleaner and greener” public spaces, are for you.

The space, where once indigenous farmers used to cultivate their food, subsistence fishers used to catch fish and riverside communities used to live for generations, is being developed and beautified. Thus, urban rivers—or rivers that flow through now well-defined cities—no more have fertile floodplains. In fact, they have no floodplains, only concrete on either side. Along with floodplains, peri-urban farms have also disappeared. Today, the ‘urban farmer’ is she who cultivates in the balcony, on the terrace and inside her housing society premises. This edition of Beejpatra is a reminder of the changing relationships between the city and its river/s and between the river and those involved in agriculture and the city.

What is interesting about cities is how they grow by extracting from and polluting the same water bodies they depend on. Pornima, an architect and environment enthusiast, explores the possibilities of the relationship between the river, city and agriculture by discussing the social, religious, economic and ecological features of rivers in Indian cities. Chandana, through the case study of Kapila river in southern state of Karnataka, focuses on the social and cultural meanings and impacts of the river.

I first happened to notice the geographical and topographical expansion of a city when I moved to Guwahati, a growing city on the banks of the transnational Brahmaputra. All cities are extensively dependent on surrounding natural water bodies. Although smaller than many Indian cities, Guwahati is spread mostly along the south side of the river and a little to the north. One can easily make out that to the north of the Brahmaputra is the peri-urban and the rural. So, is the river an urban feature or is it a border for the urban?

Nitin, a farmer, urban designer and architect, writes in this journal about the expanding peri-urban Delhi and critiques the fast-paced one-directional development of human settlement from 'peri-urban' to 'urban'. In the race of this one-directional development, urban designers and planners exclude indigenous communities already living on and protecting the banks of now 'urban' rivers.

The interdependence of riverside indigenous communities and the river is also explored in this edition of the journal through research of agricultural activities in cities. Nishant and Aakiz, researchers at People's Resource Centre (PRC), share details in their writing of a quantitative study on the urban agricultural status in and around the urban capital region of Delhi. Beejpatra editor Akshita writes on the Yamuna river, its unsuccessful restoration project and its exclusionary approach.

Raina's article is on the precariousness of the lives of indigenous communities living along river banks like Ganga. Raina is a PhD scholar at Centre for Study of Regional Development, JNU. Archana, an MPhil scholar at Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, concerns her article with the visible development discrepancies between the city and the inhabited islands of the adjoining river, namely Patna and the islands of Ganga.

Unequal development across the Indian landscape is barely disguised. Rather, it is ugly. Those agricultural topographies that fall outside of the city's limits receive little to no attention, remaining underdeveloped and poverty-stricken, while only a few kilometres away—sometimes, just across the river—people fly past on flyovers and metro rails to malls and offices. It is thus worth finding out what the river does to and for urban development and vice versa.

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Guest Editor

Geetanjali Gurlhosur is a young freelance journalist, social researcher and documentary filmmaker. She has worked as a multimedia journalist with Indian Express and Hindustan Times in the past. Also an activist, Geetanjali enjoys reading, writing poetry and prose, doing photography and having conversations on conflict, gender, sexuality and menstrual health.