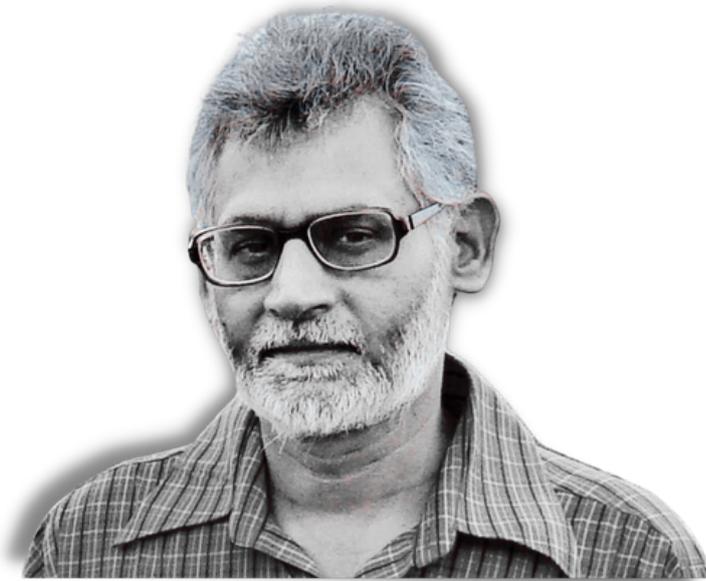


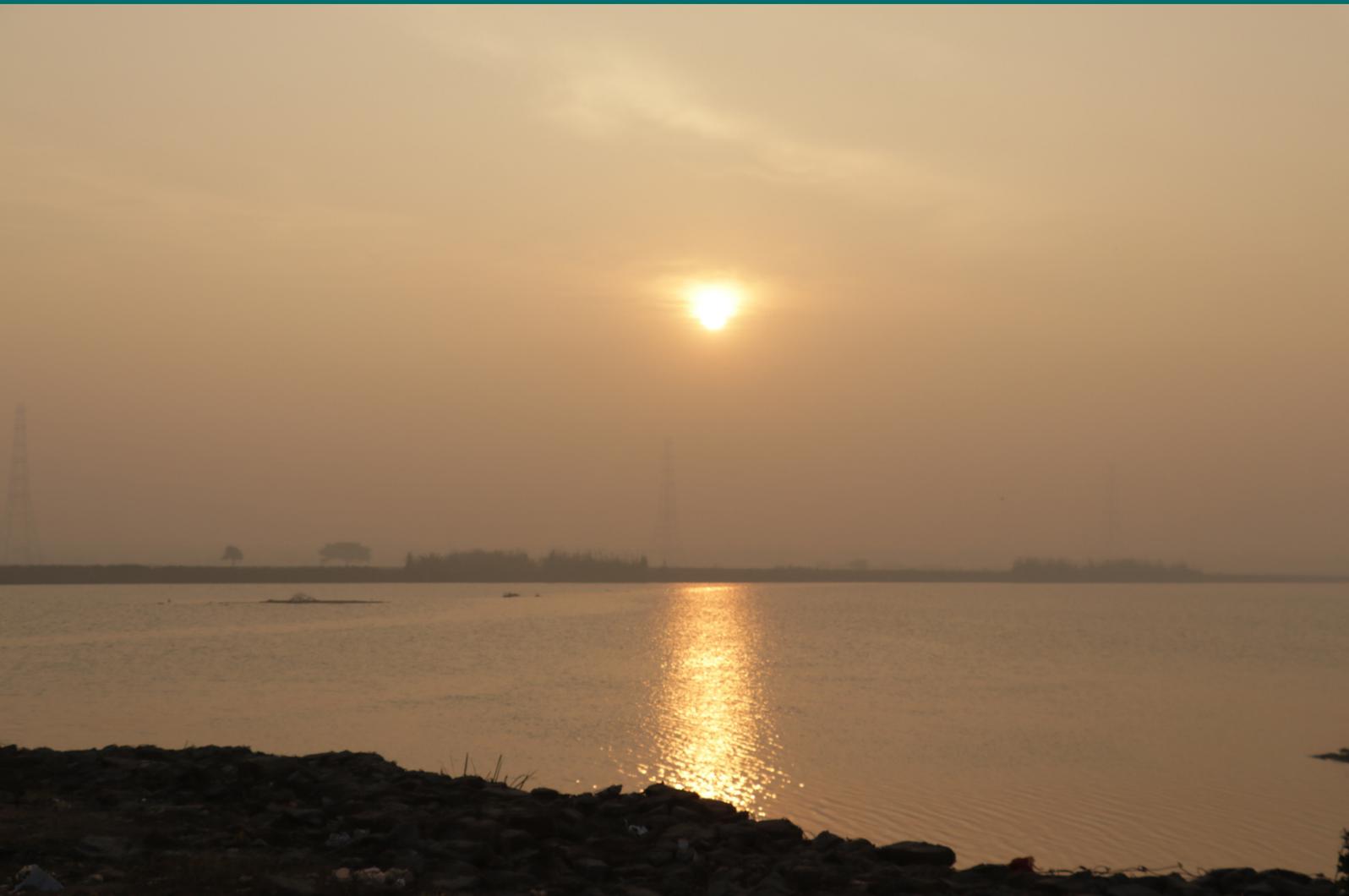
“beautification of the floodplains is a meaningless exercise unless ecological considerations override everything else”



In Conversation with **Manoj Misra**

The river Yamuna, perhaps an icon of all dying rivers in India, was in the national news again during the festive season a few months ago when Chhath devotees took dips into its polluted waters. The divide between lingering traditionality and a pretence of modernity in our contemporary cities was out on display when the cultural existence of the 'holy' river shrouded its material nonexistence in the national capital. Beyond this annual ritual of festivities and pouring of attention from various political corners, there has been a long history of efforts to rejuvenate the river.

At a time when the river is getting renewed attention from the judiciary, NGOs and authorities (including the Delhi Development Authority, which is developing a riverfront on both banks), PRC member and Beejpatra editor Akshita talked to Manoj Misra, the founder of Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan. Manoj Ji is the principal petitioner in a critical court case that seeks to stop all polluting activities in the Yamuna (readers can refer to the 'Manoj Misra vs Union of India & ors').



Akshita (A) - As you might be aware, Yamuna floodplains have been the site for many government projects like biodiversity parks, Commonwealth games village, Akshardham temple, etc. At the same time, NGT has time and again pushed for the removal of agricultural activities and bastis. How do you understand this selective nature of NGT orders with regards to “encroachments”?

Manoj Misra (MM) - I want to make one thing clear. NGT does not say that farming should be stopped. In the Judgement of January 13, 2015, NGT has mentioned farming in the floodplains is a legitimate activity, but the use of chemicals like fertilisers and pesticides should be stopped as it is a health risk. NGT has not said that farming should not take place. As long as the water quality of the river is bad, farmers can do floriculture and horticulture. The kind

of farming that is taking place on the floodplains is harmful to the floodplains and is a health risk to humans and other life forms on the floodplains.

Also, the NGT judgment is very clear on no encroachments and construction in the floodplains. Since the judgment is from 2015 so obviously it cannot address issues that predate that year.

But on our part, we have consistently contested since 2007 any construction in the floodplains.

A- This is true, but the CPCB report of 2019, which was based on a study conducted on the floodplains as per Yamuna Monitoring Committee's order, had different findings in which the toxic content in the agricultural produce was within the permissible limit.

MM- The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) is misusing NGT orders to remove farmers. If any agency is using NGT orders for their own purposes, there isn't much NGT can do about that.

NGT has clearly said that farming on the floodplains is a legitimate activity. Even the Draft Master Plan of Delhi 2041 clearly says that specific locations might be identified for permitting agriculture on the floodplains.

Farming in floodplains has always happened. But the kind of farming that is taking place now is not the kind that should be permitted. It is chemical farming.

Unfortunately, no farmer in the Delhi stretch has any love for the land. They have no sense of ownership. I would not even call them legitimate farmers. For the farmers who are practising farming today are all unauthorised subtenants. Out of the original farmers who used to practice farming on lands leased from the DDA, hardly any of them are still farming. Most of those farming these lands are from outside (of Delhi).

Most (of these farmers) are migrants. Moreover, they can't even go to court to contest the ownership of the land as they do not have any papers. They have become habitual to farming in this arrangement. Today, all that used to be organic has been turned into chemical farming. We even tried to resolve the land issue by arranging a meeting between the then DDA VC Balvinder Kumar and farmer representatives.

These reports are based on a few select samples and are not truly representative. For example, there are also reports which have found toxic levels of contaminants in the produce grown. So who to believe? The way forward is strict natural or organic farming preferably of cucurbits, which was what was traditionally raised in floodplains.

A- What was the outcome of the meeting?

MM - I don't know. You should ask the farmer representatives.

A- Moving on, The Master Plan of Delhi (MPD)-2041 does permit the practice of agriculture, even on floodplains, but has not recognised it as a separate land use category which was not the case in the MPD-2021.

MM - That is right. One should fight for this.

A- DDA's Yamuna Riverfront Project is underway with cycling tracks, biodiversity park, etc., proposed to be constructed along the entire stretch of Yamuna. The aim is to create recreation space and increase public access. How do you think this compares to other riverfront projects, namely Sabarmati and do you think these developments are needed, considering their aim and possible impact?

MM- What is happening is not the Sabarmati model although any so-called beautification of the floodplains is a

meaningless exercise unless ecological considerations override everything else.

A- Yes, it isn't. Sabarmati was completely concretised. However, the Yamuna riverfront project is going on, and constructions are taking place in parts across the floodplains.

MM- The Yamuna Riverfront Project is an ornamental exercise. Man has no right or mandate to create floodplains or beautify floodplains. It is absurd. Anything which is put over there cannot survive for a long period of time. If you put a bench on the floodplains, it will be submerged in water as it happened in 2010¹. It is a waste of public money.

Reasons like increasing accessibility are just reasons. Floodplains were always accessible. Those who want to visit can still visit, and those who don't want to, will not, even after there is a riverfront.

But this is happening, and we can't do much about it now other than raise our concerns if anything that violates the NGT 2015 judgment is attempted.

A- In light of the continuous failure of the government to clean the Yamuna, what do you think should be the next step in making Yamuna pollutant free? Like recently, when foam started getting collected on the Yamuna and drew a lot of media attention, the Delhi government formed the Yamuna Cleaning Cell, which talks about STPs. STPs find mention in many plans.

MM- We have seen foam get collected on the Yamuna every year. STP is not a river question. Whether the river existed or not, a city like Delhi needs functional STPs. The state of our STPs is a part of the urbanisation challenge. It is and should not be related to the rejuvenation of the river.

¹In 2010, Delhi witnessed one of the most severe floods. Water had to be released from the Hathnikund barrage in Haryana and many low-lying areas of Delhi were advised to evacuate. Flood waters entered several villages, destroyed crops, and forced the urban poor to seek shelter on footpaths.

If there was flow in the Yamuna, no matter how much sewage you put in it, it could have carried away anything. Today, it is a drain. There is no river left. So many plans are already in place, like the Yamuna Action Plan, Namami Gange, etc., but the authorities fail to understand what the river wants. In 2020, during lockdown, the river revealed to us what it wants.

A- With the rise of the climate justice movement, which calls for linking the environment with social justice, how do you see the relationship of the Yamuna and the indigenous communities inhabiting its floodplains? As many have been practising farming, animal rearing, fishing, etc., on the floodplains for decades.

MM- The majority of people who are farming on the floodplains have no love for the river. If the river existed or not, it wouldn't have made a difference to them. Instead, they face problems because of the river whenever it floods every year, and they have to move and live in tents.

However, having said that, we still stand by this that sustainable and organic farming on the floodplains is a legitimate activity. It should be promoted and not destroyed. At the same time, people should also do organic farming. DDA is not making enough efforts to shift to organic farming either. But even the farmers are not free from blame. We also made attempts during the Yamuna Satyagrah and requested experts to train the farmers in organic farming practices. However, that led us nowhere as farmers are still doing the same type of chemical farming.

Social justice is important, but it is for those whose practices support the ecosystem. We can't be blind to reality. There are bad realities. We can't be blind to the problems on both sides.