What the Eye Does Not See:
The Yamuna in the Imagination of Delhi

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This article traces the shifting visibility of the river Yamuna in the social and ecological imagination of Delhi. It delineates how the riverbed has changed from being a neglected "non-place" to prized real estate for private and public corporations. It argues that the transformation of an urban commons into a commodity is not only embedded in processes of political economy, but is also driven by aesthetic sensibilities that shape how ecological landscapes are valued. However, the commodification of the riverbed must confront the fact that the Yamuna is an ecological entity with dynamics that can defy attempts at domestication.

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In early September 2010, the citizens of Delhi were witness to an unprecedented sight in the centre of the city. Erased from view was the unremarkable green-brown plain dotted with fields, trees and huts where the river Yamuna usually flows in a small and sluggish stream. Instead, a shimmering sheet of water stretched out wide, obliterating the land, and lapping at the bottom of the old iron railway bridge. The 100-year-old reticulated bridge, a sturdy yet graceful monument to colonial engineering, suddenly appeared vulnerable as strong currents swept water dangerously close, causing trains and road traffic across the bridge to be cancelled.

Close to the bridge were the submerged homes of poor squatters; a few thousand residents had been evacuated and housed in tents where they stayed for the next two weeks until the river ebbed. For many of them, temporary displacement was an annual event to which they were inured, an inescapable accompaniment to the experience of living by the river, eking out a slender livelihood from growing vegetables and melons on the riverbed.

The sudden rise in the Yamuna had been caused by unremitting heavy monsoon rains in the catchment of the river in the lower foothills of the Himalaya. Although the annual rainy season always brings about a swell in the river, the ceaseless downpour of September 2010 had raised water levels to such a height that the protection offered by embankments and dams seemed suddenly shaky. With the river threatening to spill over the levees and reclaim its floodplain, the upstream state of Haryana had been forced to release large quantities to safeguard its barrages and embankments. In Haryana, a section of the Tajewala barrage had been washed away and more than 125 villages in Yamunanagar and Panipat districts had flooded as a result. This inundation across a huge expanse of farmland had dissipated some of the violent energy of the river in spate, an inadvertent boon that saved the downstream city of Delhi.

Delhi had experienced floods before. In 1995, 15,000 poor families in low-lying areas next to the river were rendered homeless when the river approached the danger mark, but the rest of the city was untouched. In 1978, the worst floods in living memory, a million people were affected as the river reached its highest recorded level, submerging 70,000 hectares of land in the city. The raging floodwaters breached river embankments so that well-to-do north Delhi neighbourhoods such as Model Town and Mukherjee Nagar were under 15-20 feet of water for almost a week, with extensive damage to homes and property. People recall how they stayed up all night sandbagging their homes in the vain effort to stem the floodwaters; how unexpectedly and

swiftly the water rose; how boats plied in city streets instead of cars and buses; how the army ferried supplies to stranded families on rooftops, rushing a pregnant woman to hospital in a motorboat just in time to deliver a baby; how the water left the walls sodden and stinking for many months after. With the passage of time, the memory of panic, disruption and anxiety had faded; the events of 1978 were now tinged only with the recollection of excitement and adventure.

In comparison, the effects of the 2010 flood were minor and short-lived. Streets in low-lying areas stayed waterlogged for a week; people and vehicles had to wade through a foot or more of muddy water. For 10 days, the sewage and storm water drains flowing from the city into the river were shut to pre-empt a further rise in the river's level, and residents in areas close to the river had to cope with smelly sewage backflow and toilets that would not flush. But soon the river returned to its former shrunken state, sewage once more flowed into it unabated, and the crisis of the floods had passed. Once more, the city had weathered another monsoon, another imminent flood.

Visibility and Place: Popular Perceptions

What was then unprecedented about the 2010 floods was not the fact of their occurrence, but their visibility to the city at large. Previous floods had come and gone, but the only people who were aware of them were those directly affected – a tiny minority in a city of 14 million people – and the government agencies responsible for dealing with them: the Flood Control and Irrigation Department, the Delhi Jal Board (the city's water supply, sewage and sanitation authority) and the Municipal Corporation's Slum Wing (for managing squatter settlements). In the case of the 2010 floods, however, dozens of television news channels stationed their outdoor broadcasting vans to film the river, reporting minute-by-minute on the rising water, its proximity to the danger mark, the state of the railway bridge and the consequent dislocation of traffic, the plight of displaced squatters, and interviewing government officials and residents in flood-threatened neighbourhoods. In September 2010, when the Yamuna in Delhi was flowing 2 metres above its danger mark of 204.83 metres, the river had finally become newsworthy.

The dramatised relaying of this event to the public eye was not only a result of the inherently spectacular character of the river in spate. It was also partly an offshoot of the growth of news media in search of new material to televise during its round-the-clock broadcasts. Since the onset of economic liberalisation in the 1990s that opened up television channels to private companies, the demand for reportage and features has risen. Imminent disasters and crises help fill the constant demand for news, and television, along with older forms of print capitalism, has helped produce not only the floods-as-news but also an urban public concerned by threats to parts of their city.

Aiding the task of the news media in making the floods visible was a new, and notable, development on the right bank of the river: the Yamuna expressway. Completed in the summer of 2010, the concrete pillars of this gigantic four-lane highway march parallel to the riverbed, offering a high vantage point from which to observe a river that had hitherto been hidden from view. The

broadcasting vans with their overhead satellite dishes and smartly-dressed correspondents reporting live from location joined curious onlookers crowding the edge of the expressway, gazing out at the spreadsheet of water below them. Without the expressway, the eloquence of the liquid expanse, the imperilled iron bridge, the treetops sticking out like miniature bushes from the water, would be invisible. Without the expressway, there would be nowhere to stand and nothing to see. Without the expressway, for most residents of Delhi, the river would cease to be.[1]

In the story of the Yamuna's shifting visibility in the social and ecological imagination of Delhi, the expressway is an irony. Built to ease road traffic congestion along the city's north-south artery, its construction was speeded up for the Commonwealth Games held in October 2010 (one of the main venues for sports events – the Indraprastha Stadium – lies at the southern foot of the expressway). The highway rides over the river's western embankment, cutting through an unfamiliar landscape: the riverbed to one side, on the other the back view of a power station and the public gardens where rest the remains of India's political greats – Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. There are no recognisable landmarks, no street-side vendors and shops, no passing pedestrians; only a broad stretch of concrete, speeding cars and big blue signboards announcing exits and destinations.

The expressway, especially in the darkness of night, is a disorienting place. In fact, at first glance, it would seem to not be a place at all. Marc Augé uses the term "non-place" to describe "a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity" (2008: 63). Highway routes, along with airports and hotel chains, are part of a fleeting, transient and ephemeral world that people increasingly inhabit, spaces of "circulation, consumption and communication" (ibid: viii), where the link between individuals and their surroundings is established primarily "through the mediation of words", even prescriptive "instructions for use" (ibid: 76-77). Augé contrasts non-places with "anthropological places" that create "organically social" relations (ibid), locating them at opposite ends of the spectrum of sociality and socialisation in terms of identity and history.

Augé also points out that it is precisely their anonymity and streamlined ease of negotiation that makes non-places the site where desires and aspirations are increasingly located in a world "surrendered to solitary individuality" (2008: 63). This would certainly be true of projects like the expressway, which concretely embody the desires shared by the Delhi government and many of its citizens to make the city "world-class", visually aligned with a modernist western aesthetic and physically engineered to move people as swiftly as possible by minimising the friction of having to engage with their surroundings (Mumford 1963). Richard Sennett calls this "the neutralised city" (1990: xii) where spaces are carefully orchestrated to remove the threat of social contact, especially between different kinds of people.

So the fact that the expressway brought into view the river, however fleetingly, for the citizens of Delhi was an irony. In the "world-class" city, the Yamuna is an anomaly, an embarrassment even. Next to the expressway to supermodernity, it is an especially awkward presence. Urban eyes struggle to make sense of it:

is it nature or culture? Both these socially-produced categories come with recognisable markers. If urban nature has come to be identified with manicured parks, the Yamuna is a wilderness of shifting sandbanks, grasses and crops. Nor is it explicable in terms of rural nature: it is neither forest nor intensively-cultivated farmland. For Delhi residents, the riverbed does not fit within popular notions of nature; only when it is in spate does the river seem to assert its biophysical power. And even then, the network of barrages and embankments usually succeeds in domesticating the river, rendering it into a human-made artefact, controlled and managed.

The Yamuna in Delhi makes little cultural sense either. In a country where rivers are an intrinsic part of sacred geography, especially for the dominant Hindu majority, the Yamuna is curiously profane. To be sure, she has a place in the pantheon of river deities as the sister of Yama, the god of death and righteousness. The figures of Yamuna and Ganga flank temple entrances all over the country (Stietencron 2010). She is invoked along with Ganga in Vedic verses chanted during ritual baths. Her stepped ghats besides the temples of Delhi's Jamna Bazaar are the site of Hindu funerary rites and other purificatory ceremonies.[2] But the religious-cultural cosmos of the Yamuna is circumscribed to the Jamna Bazaar spot. Along the rest of her 22 kilometre-long flow through the city, the river is neither revered nor regarded as important to the cultural life of citizens.

It may then be said that, for the citizens of Delhi, the Yamuna is a non-place. If history, identity and social relations are the hallmarks of an "anthropological place", the Yamuna is perceived as being devoid of all these. In fact, the Yamuna is a non-place twice over since it also lacks the aspirational qualities that Augé attributes to places of supermodernity. The non-place that is the expressway snakes past the non-place that is the river, their twinned flows signifying the contradiction that lies at the heart of Delhi: the expressway is a concrete manifestation of the city's futuristic vision, its world-class ambition brought into being; the river is a watery nothingness.

Microcosms of Nature-Culture

Yet, the non-place that is the river in the city has accommodated small cultural worlds built around nature,[3] microcosms that quietly continue around the year even as the rest of Delhi is unaware or indifferent to their presence. The ghats at Jamna Bazaar descend to the river on broad flagstones and the Yamuna licks at their feet, coaxing a red boat into the water. When the boat is midstream, a man flings a sweeping shower of grainy pellets around him. From nowhere come thousands of birds, circling and swooping in ever-tightening circles, plucking the pellets from the water and soaring away. The air is dense with the flutter of white wings beating at the autumn light, a dizzy wheeling that goes on and on until the food disappears. The birds go to roost and the moment ebbs away.

The birds are black-headed gulls. As he moors the boat, the man informs me that they come from Siberia. In the four months of winter, every morning and evening, he feeds them on behalf of his uncle, a well-to-do businessman in Shahdara, a suburb in east Delhi.[4] "40 kilos in the morning, 60 kilos in the evening. Rs 3,000

a day, it costs Mamaji." Why does he do it? "*Bahut door se aate hain ye panchhi. Hamare mehmaan hain*" (They come from very far away, these birds. They are our guests). For the businessman from Shahdara, the birds from Siberia are visitors to whom hospitality is due, and the river provides a place for fulfilling the religious obligation to feed itinerants as well as the charitable duty of caring for lesser creatures.[5]

For people from the Walled City near Jamna Bazaar, the Yamuna offers a respite from urban congestion, from a life constantly crowded with people, sounds and things. I asked Satya Narayan, a middle-aged man who told me that he worked in a hotel, why he came down to the ghats. "*Yahaan bahut khula-khula hai. Tasalli milti hai*" (It's wide open and spacious here. One gets reassured).[6] We pay Rs 10 to a boatman to ferry us to the island that lies midstream. As we walk up, we unsettle the pariah kites that are warming themselves in the sunny sand. The large brown birds rise and hover, then snuggle back into the bed. In an odd way, it is reassuring to know that there are gulls and kites going about their business even as the city seethes all around them. For those searching for momentary peace, the river provides restful calm – a chance to catch one's breath and gather one's thoughts – in an urban place where open space is scarce.

In October, the islands and western margins of the riverbank are covered with sprawling fields of vegetables that supply inexpensive and fresh food to the city. The silt of the Yamuna is fertile; cauliflowers and cabbages grow vigorously, with beds of marigold and roses behind them. In the summer, there are cucumbers and melons. Lines of migrant workers from eastern Uttar Pradesh bend and straighten, planting *baingan* and *mirchi* (brinjal and chillies). Water gushes from a borewell. "*Bilkul meetha pani hai*" (The water is absolutely sweet), declares a farmer.[7]

The groundwater recharged by the Yamuna may be sweet, but studies indicate that the vegetables it irrigates are likely to be contaminated with faecal bacteria and heavy metals such as lead and cadmium.[8] Untreated industrial effluents and domestic sewage that discharge into the river in Delhi and upstream mean that, once the monsoon rain flow subsides, the river reverts to its undiluted state: still and stinking, foam-flecked and laden with the flotsam of the plastics packaging revolution. The water is black with filth. On the auspicious full-moon day of Kartik Purnima in October, I watch with awe as worshippers bathe in what looks like raw sewage. The guruji at the Bhishma Vyayamshala (gymnasium and wrestling school) on the ghats tells me phlegmatically that he takes a dip in the river twice a day.[9] "There's a difference between the eye and the mind", he says. "The eye sees only the surface, the mind perceives true meaning."

There are enough people bathing on the ghats to support the guruji's assertion that faith allows the mind to conquer matter. But not all the devout are willing to do so any longer. A little upstream of Jamna Bazaar lies Nigambodh Ghat, the main riverside cremation site in Delhi, a site steeped in Hindu mythology and, now, sewage. Apparently, many mourners, whose mind's eye could not resolve the paradox of divinity and disgust, protested that Jamna-ji was too filthy to bathe in. The Delhi government, which in the late 1990s was led by the Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP), came to their aid, installing an exclusive pipeline from the distant river Ganga to supply *gangajal* (holy water) for purificatory rites. As Anupam Mishra, a cultural historian of water, observed, *"Ulti ganga beh rahi hai"*.[10] It is indeed an upside-down world when, instead of cleaning the river, the government prefers the short-cut stratagem of bringing in water from another river.

Pollution, Illegality and Ethnic Cleansing

The annual rhythms of the Yamuna harmonised with the ebb and flow of farmers and labourers, the Hindu ritual calendar and charitable and funerary practices, and the desire of some city-dwellers for an open space. The banks also provided a space where dhobis from the Walled City could spread laundered clothes to dry in the sun. The riverbank functioned as an urban commons, with unwritten but nonetheless tangible norms about access and use, with areas being informally demarcated by function. Among these public functions, defecation ranks high. For large sections of the urban poor who live on or close to the river-bed, and who do not have access to sanitation, the wilderness of the riverbed is a vast open-air toilet where the occasional shrubs and rocky outcrops provide privacy. Early morning and late evening, under cover of dark, groups of women with veiled faces pick their way through little piles of waste to the more remote spots. Later in the day, men repair to the wasteland, armed with plastic bottles of water to wash themselves after they are done. To those who live there, these widely-practised, agreed-upon uses are by no means an infringement of the commons, though that is how they are perceived by well-to-do citizens who have access to toilets in their homes. Like rural commons – pastures, forests and streams – the riverbed too is a resource on which the poor depend more than those who own private lands. Unlike the rural commons, the poor do not gather fuel, fodder or berries here; instead, their chief usufruct is space for the conduct of a basic biological function, a space that is notably scarce in the city. However, defecation contributes to the sense of the riverbed as a literal wasteland, derelict and defiled. It evokes disgust, inter-secting with the wider popular perception of the place as an abused, uncared-for non-place.

The association in the popular imagination of the riverbed with poor people and their polluting practices was to play an important role in destroying perhaps the biggest and most vibrant cultural world on the riverfront. Ironically, this once-flourishing community was, in some ways, also a product of the wider popular perception of the floodplain as a non-place. That is, the settlement of the poor on the riverfront in the 1980s and 1990s, and their subsequent eviction in the 2000s, were both processes that derived from the marginality of this space. Their opposing tendencies indicate a historic shift in popular perceptions of how a non-place should be treated. As I shall go on to discuss, the subsequent phase of "reclamation" of the riverbed in the 2000s inaugurates the current moment of creating value via commodifi-cation, incorporating a non-place into the spaces of capitalist consumption.

The year 1977 marked the end of a two-year period of political Emergency when the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had suspended civil liberties and undertaken "welfare" progra-mmes including forced slum clearance in Delhi, during which an estimated 7,00,000 poor people were evicted from their homes, their protests brutally suppressed, in a campaign led by the prime minister's son Sanjay Gandhi (an unofficial power beside the throne) and Jagmohan, then lieutenant-governor of Delhi (Tarlo 2002).[11] The strong public opposition to these excesses in the aftermath of the Emergency meant that disciplinary desires lay dormant for the next two decades. In the late 1970s, there was a spurt of construction in the capital with the immediate goal of building facilities for the Asian Games to be held in Delhi in 1982. This project, represented as one where national prestige was at stake, provided the grounds for the Delhi Development Authority or DDA[12] to violate its own master plan and suspend procedural rules in order to enter into dubious contracts with construction firms.[13] The building of flyovers, sports facilities and luxury apartments (to house participating athletes, which later became homes for senior bureaucrats), brought to the city an estimated one million labourers from other states. Once the construction was over, these labourers stayed on, often in shanty settlements in the shadow of the concrete structures they had built, seeking other employment. In the early 1980s, their presence was toler-ated and even encouraged by local politicians who secured for them water taps and ration cards. The populist governments at the centre were willing to allow the migrants some recognition, albeit of a limited nature. While their concern did not extend to the provision of low-cost housing or most civic amenities, it did give workers a temporary reprieve in the battle to create homes around their places of work.

For the Asiad '82, a segment of the Yamuna's floodplain was diverted to construct the Players' building, a hostel for athletes which could not be completed in time, and the Indraprastha Stadium, which soon fell into disuse. Thousands of workers who were involved in the construction of these buildings came to settle in the surrounding area which remained an open plain along the western embankment (*pushta*). During the 1980s and 1990s, the encouragement of Congress politicians and the stud-ied indifference of the bureaucracy led to expanding swathes of settlement on the strips of no-man's land on both sides of the river. By 2004, almost 3,50,000 poor squatters lived along the Yamuna in Delhi. There were a few farmers among them, but the majority were workers – small vendors, porters, rickshaw-pullers, masons, mechanics, artisans, factory workers, domestic help, security guards – who had built homes in the only centrally-located place that afforded them a space close to their means of livelihood. Over the course of more than two decades, they popu-lated the land along the embankments, strengthening their shanty houses with brick, cement and even concrete, securing public water taps and electricity, starting schools and health clin-ics with the help of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the state government. Concealed from public view, the low-lying land of the Yamuna Pushta had been transformed into a dense settlement of Delhi's under-class – a squalid, illegal, but nonethe-less vibrant cultural world.

In 2004, defecation along the Yamuna by these settlers became the grounds for the demolition of their homes. The Delhi High

Court ordered that the Yamuna Pushta *bastis* (working-class settlements) be removed because they were responsible for polluting the river and because they were encroaching on the riverbed. Both these charges were based on the selective use of facts. In 2000, court orders had already resulted in the closure of thousands of small industrial firms across the city on the grounds of water pollution (Baviskar et al 2006). However, even with the flow of industrial effluents reduced to 218 million litres a day, the river continued to be polluted by the unchecked discharge of domestic sewage, receiving an estimated 1,789 million litres a day of untreated waste water as it passed through the city (CPCB 2004; CSE 2007). In a city that produces 3,267 million litres a day of sewage – more sewage than all the class II cities in India put together – more than half of all sewage goes untreated. Notably, this wastewater is generated by only half of Delhi's 14 million population – those who live in "planned colonies, regularised colonies, resettlement colonies and urban villages" (CPCB 2004: 1); the other seven million who live in illegal and unauthorised settlements like the Yamuna Pushta do not have access to drains and sewerage.[14] So, by ordering the eviction of Pushta-dwellers on the grounds of polluting the Yamuna, the judiciary placed the burden of excrement produced by Delhi's well-to-do sections on the working-class people of the bastis along the river.[15]

A similar shifting of blame was evident in the charge of encroachment. While it was indeed true that the Yamuna Pushta settlers were squatting on land that was legally owned by the DDA (on the west bank) and the Uttar Pradesh Flood and Irrigation Department (on the east bank), far larger tracts of these two agencies' lands along the river had been taken over by the government and handed over to private bodies in blatant violation of the master plan for Delhi which designated these lands as an ecological zone. Besides two power plants and disused sports facilities built in the 1980s, the Yamuna waterfront by the early 2000s was arrayed with an Information Technology Park, a sprawling metro train depot,[16] and the gigantic Akshardham Temple complex which was retrospectively legalised by the Supreme Court over the protests of the landowning agency (Srivastava 2009). Also on the drawing board was the 2010 Commonwealth Games Village with high-rise luxury apartments. A shopping mall, housing for Delhi metro workers, and a bus depot were also waiting to be built. However, none of these projects were criticised for being located on the riverbed in direct contravention of the area's land-use designation. In fact, the courts permitted all of them to go ahead. Only the settlements of poor workers were targeted for demolition.

Displacement and the Poor

The consequences of the 2004 court order were devastating. Sanjay Amar Colony was one of a series of working class settlements that ranged along the Yamuna Pushta, the embankment along the western side of the river. The basti was no fly-by-night agglomeration of ramshackle huts. Over the course of more than 20 years, hundreds of brick and cement dwellings came to line the streets. Of the Pushta's population of 3,50,000, an estimated 1,50,000 were displaced over the course of one week in June, with the rest to follow. When the bulldozers left, the Pushta

resembled a bombed-out site. Homeless families camped out under the ferocious summer sun, wondering where to go, warily avoiding the police posted in the area to pre-empt any protest. Hundreds of people sifted through the rubble, trying to salvage their belongings.

Mohammad Faim broke down and cried.[17] "Nineteen years in this city", said the white-haired native of Siwan, Bihar, "and I have to return empty-handed. How will I show my face in my village?" Until a few weeks ago, Faim was known to everyone in his neighbourhood as "Prem Hotelwala", the owner of a successful dhaba in Sanjay Amar Colony. The dhaba was patronised by rickshaw-pullers, small vendors and artisans, who lived in the basti and plied their trades and wares nearby in the bustling heart of the Walled City. It also supported Faim's family of five until June 2004 when Prem Hotel and its customers' homes were razed to the ground. In the ensuing fire, Faim lost everything but a few stainless steel plates and plastic jars. "At my age, what am I to do? Where will I go?" he asked.

The Yamuna Pushta demolitions were part of a city-wide campaign of clearing squatter settlements that, between the years 2000 and 2004, displaced an estimated 8,00,000 people from the capital. Although sterilisation was not an "incentive" this time around, in some ways the 2004 demolition outstripped the dark days of the Emergency. For one, far fewer people were resettled. In theory, the Delhi government had a policy of offering land compensation to those who could offer proof of residence. Those who could demonstrate that they settled in the city before 1990 were eligible to receive, upon payment of Rs 7,000, a plot of 18 square metres in a resettlement colony on the outskirts of the city. Those who settled between 1990 and 1998 were eligible to receive a plot of 12.5 square metres. However, resettlement colonies such as Bhalaswa and Holambi Kalan to which the displaced were sent were little more than wastelands, with no amenities, 20-30 kilometres from people's place of work (Menon-Sen and Bhan 2008). Yet, despite the difficulties of relocating to such inhospitable places – losing employment, withdrawing children from school – people still grabbed at the chance to secure a legitimate home in the city. Unfortunately, many who qualified to receive resettlement plots did not get them. Only 16% of those displaced from Yamuna Pushta were given plots. The rest found their names missing from municipal lists. Thrusting forward his documents – ration card, voter identity card, government token issued in 1990 – Ram Kumar Sah expressed the anger and despair of most Pushta residents:

> The whole week I've been queuing outside this office and that, hoping some official will listen to me. But it's hopeless. I've lived here for 25 years. I pushed my *thela* (cart) for miles, bringing bricks and mud to make this place liveable. I built my house with my own hands. All that hard work, and I get nothing at all? The government should just strangle us. At least that's quick.[18]

Those who could not muster even these documents – a majority of residents – stood no chance of receiving any housing land. They were simply rendered homeless. Some scattered to the city's periphery, living on rent in squatter settlements on the margins of Delhi, forced to again live precariously in the interstices of the law and the urban economy.

The shift in popular perceptions and political equations from tolerating and even encouraging settlement in the 1980s and early 1990s, to the brute removal of squatters in the 2000s, was reflective of a new hardening of attitudes towards the city's working class, an antipathy towards "informal" livelihoods and spaces on the part of an urban elite that had become disproportionately empowered by the liberalisation policies adopted in the 1990s, and that had the backing of the higher judiciary. This "bourgeois environmentalism" (Baviskar 2003, 2011) ignored the structural imperatives behind squatting on public lands to adopt a more hard line position against slum-dwellers. A high court judge remarked that resettling an encroacher on public land was akin to rewarding a pickpocket (Ramanathan 2006: 3195). But while the encroachers on Yamuna Pushta were deemed criminals in the eyes of the law, they saw themselves as being forced into that role. As Ramadevi pointed out,

> I sell vegetables, barely making enough to feed my four children. But I save every paisa so that they can go to school and make something of their lives. I can't afford to pay a high rent for a place to stay. Nor can I spend Rs 20-30 on travel every day. That's why I live here – *gareeb aadmi aur kahan jayega*? (Where else would a poor person go?)

The economics of everyday life in the city, of surviving when wages are low, dictate that people live close to their workplace. But this need goes unmet in Delhi's real estate market that offers scant legal housing for poor workers. During 1994-2004, the DDA planned to build 1.62 million dwelling units but built only 5,60,000, none of them within the economic reach of the poor.[19] It was no surprise then that more than 23% of Delhi's population lived in bastis like Yamuna Pushta. Standing by the rubble of his demolished home, Abdul Barik gestured to the squalor around him, "You think we want to live like this? We are also human. We also want to live decently, without fear of being harassed and uprooted. But there is no other option." Under the circumstances, encroachment was not a choice but a compulsion for poor workers, their hope of securing a foothold in the urban economy. However, in the Court's determination to clean the river by clearing its banks of poor squatters, the underlying political economy of housing in the city was ignored as was the complicity of the state in enabling settlement on the riverfront in the first place.

The Court's selective targeting of poor squatters while letting more powerful polluters and encroachers off the hook reflects the partial, and even distorted, environmental vision of Delhi's well-to-do citizens. A characteristic feature of bourgeois environmentalism is its hostility to the poor in the pursuit of a "clean and green" environment, where the very presence of the poor is equated with pollution. "Cleaning" the Yamuna thus did not take the form of installing sewage treatment facilities but entailed the removal of working-class squatters from the riverbank. As Asher Ghertner points out, an aesthetic vision has been central to the liberalisation-era quest of making Delhi a "world-class" city: "According to this aesthetic mode of governing, …widespread in Delhi today, if a development project looks 'world-class', then it is most often declared planned; if a settlement looks polluting, it is sanctioned as unplanned and illegal" (Ghertner 2011: 280). This helps explain the differential treatment accorded to slums on the one hand and to luxury high-rises and stadiums on the other.

Though the eviction of squatters cleared the riverbed, it did nothing to address the actual acute problem of water pollution. Meanwhile, projects that reflected the world-class aspirations of the city's elite were retrospectively legalised.

In 2004, the Court-ordered demolitions were aggressively implemented by Jagmohan, former lieutenant-general of Delhi during the Emergency in the 1970s, in his capacity as minister for tourism and culture. Once cleared of the bastis, the Yamuna bank was to have been "beautified" with gardens, promenades and parking lots stretching down from the historic Red Fort to the river. The 2004 demolitions on the west bank of the river were followed by equally harsh evictions from the east bank in the summer of 2006. In June of that year, the homes of more than 50,000 squatters were razed to the ground. In what had, by then, become a familiar tragedy, most of those who lost their homes received no compensation. A small fraction were temporarily housed in shelters in Savda Ghevra, 40 kilometres away, and effectively lost their means of livelihood (see Baviskar in press). By the end of 2006, the riverbank had been cleared of all those citizens whom the Court deemed to be "non-people" – those who failed to legally own private property and whose consequent dependence on the commons rendered them invisible as rights-bearing citizens. Denied access to housing and basic services by the government, and then condemned for this very lack, the eviction of working-class settlers and the destruction of their community reflected the consolidation of anti-poor hostility on the part of the judiciary, bourgeois environmentalists and state officials. In retrospect, it became evident that the hostile manoeuvres of demolition and displacement were a necessary precondition for the transformation of the riverfront as a place of value. The removal of non-people was essential for the reinvention of a non-place.

Commodification and the Creation of Value

By 2007, selectively cleared of its encroachments, the Yamuna riverfront appeared to be *terra nullius*, an uninhabited place outside the realm of value, inviting investment.[20] If the high court order evicting poor squatters seemed to indicate some concern for the polluted state of the river, no such environmental concern was evident when it came to permitting the construction of capital-intensive projects on the riverbed. In July 2009, a bench of the Supreme Court of India, headed by the chief justice, approved the construction of luxury high-rise apartments close to the Yamuna in east Delhi as part of a complex to house athletes and officials during the Commonwealth Games 2010. The 100-acre Games Village had been the centre of controversy since its inception, with an environmentalist NGO, Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan (YJA, Keep Yamuna Alive Campaign), petitioning the high court in 2007 to stop construction since permanent structures on the floodplain would adversely affect its ecological functioning as an area crucial for groundwater recharge and accommodating excess flows during the monsoons.[21] The construction was also challenged by farmers from Patpar, Mandavali and Shakarpur villages in east Delhi who participated in a year-long sit-in satyagraha at the proposed site of the Games Village to protest against the takeover of their land, first for the Akshardham temple and

then the Games Village. Baljit Singh, general secretary of the Delhi Peasants' Multipurpose Cooperative Society, showed documents dating back to 1949, granting co-op members the right to cultivate on the riverbed. "The *sarkar* talks about creating biodiversity parks, but we have been maintaining biodiversity for almost 60 years", he said. "Just let us be".

However, the judges did not find any merit in the environmental arguments of the YJA and the farmers. After reviewing the conflicting reports submitted by the Ministry of Environment and Forests and the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, and examining the city master plan prepared by the DDA, the Delhi High Court had set up a committee to monitor the environmental impact of the Commonwealth Games Village. However, it refused to halt construction, even though the YJA argued that if construction continued, the project would be a fait accompli and any subsequent order against it would be meaningless. In response, the DDA, as the agency in charge of the project, appealed against the high court order in the Supreme Court, claiming that an environmental oversight committee would hamper work on a project of national importance which had to be completed on a tight schedule. The Supreme Court concurred with their view and, dismissing the environmental committee appointed by the high court, allowed construction to steam ahead without hindrance. However, and most significantly, the Supreme Court did not justify its decision on grounds that the urgency or importance of the project superseded environmental concerns. The judgment stated categorically that all the arguments about the ecological value of the location were baseless: *the place was not a riverbed or a floodplain.*

This authoritative pronouncement by the Supreme Court, an imprimatur for converting the riverfront to real estate, has sealed the fate of the Yamuna. No longer a non-place, it has become a frontier for get-rich-quick schemes (cf Tsing 2005), for speculation in a land market that has seen spiralling prices in the booming post-liberalised urban economy. Along with speculation have come sweetheart deals, with state officials colluding with private developers to profit from the transfer of public lands. The subsidy to builders included bailing out Emaar MGF, the Dubai-based real estate developer contracted to build the Games Village. Under a public-private partnership (PPP) arrangement, the DDA allotted 27 acres of prime land for free to the company to build 1,168 luxury flats to house athletes and officials. Under the terms of the contract, the firm would sell two-thirds of the flats while DDA would sell the remainder. After the financial downturn of 2009, the cash-strapped company appealed to the government for help and the DDA responded by giving it an interest-free loan of $100 million, to be repaid in the form of additional flats.[22]

Among similar subsidies given to private developers, the case of the Akshardham temple complex stands out. Built on 90 acres of the floodplain, the sprawling site also includes a lake, extensive gardens with a musical fountain, an IMAX theatre, a food court, and a centre for Applied Research in Social Harmony. Commentators have characterised the complex as a religious theme park, a form of "Disney-divinity" (Srivastava 2009). Construction of the temple began illegally in April 2000, despite protests from farmers who were evicted from the land, and the

Uttar Pradesh flood and irrigation department which petitioned the Court arguing that 30 acres of land belonged to them but had been illicitly claimed and disposed of by the DDA. However, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the temple, pointing out that most of it had already been built – an argument that was likely to have been influenced by the power of the organisation building it. The Swaminarayan sect is not only well endowed but well connected; the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance was ruling at the centre at that time and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani was a personal friend of the sect's leader.

Projects such as the Akshardham temple and the Commonwealth Games Village – the term "village" suggesting a pastoral community, a low-rise settlement harmonising with its setting, when what has been built consists of multi-storeyed luxury apartments with a captive power plant – illustrate how the new development has been actively fostered by the government with massive subsidies being given to corporate organisations, not only through land being transferred at nominal rates but through interest-free loans and buy-back guarantees. Other capital-intensive projects have rapidly flowed in their wake. With the Akshardham temple acting as an anchoring point on the eastern bank and a network of flyovers and widened roads being built to accommodate the enhanced traffic parallel to the eastern riverfront, other concrete developments have followed suit. The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) has located its Yamuna bank station and extensive train depot within 300 metres of the river; Parsvnath Builders has constructed a shopping mall adjacent to the Games Village, and the remaining land along the river is earmarked for similar projects. The reinvention of the riverfront is proceeding apace. As one travels along the overhead metro line from central to east Delhi, crossing the Yamuna on the new metro bridge, one can look down on the patchwork of farms rapidly being replaced by grand buildings. In most citizens' eyes, the transformation is a welcome one: finally, the neglected suburb of east Delhi, home to slums and middle class neighbourhoods, has a skyline to be proud of. And if this skyline swallows up the non-place that was the river, that is just as it should be, for in its place there is now a landscape of value, where the worth of a place can be measured in money and in the recognisable form of architectural excess.

Ecology, Commodity Aesthetics and the Flow of Value

What, then, remains of the Yamuna as an ecological entity that lies outside the circuit of commodity value?[23] Has the imagination of urban Delhi been completely colonised by the vision of the riverfront as a "world-class" space? Has the river been comprehensively transformed into real estate? As this essay shows, the line between water and land not only changes with the seasons – becoming especially blurred during the three monsoon months when the river swells to accommodate 70% of its annual flow – but has also altered over the years as successive embankments have gradually hemmed in the river and "reclaimed" land from its bed. Until the 1970s, the floodplain was regarded as wasteland, given over to seasonal cultivation by farmers' cooperatives who leased land from the flood and irrigation department. The very fact of landownership by that agency indicated that the

primary purpose of this strip was related to the management of water in the city. Small-scale farming on the rich silt deposited by the river was not seen as inimical to the task of regulating water flows.

The incremental construction of embankments in a piecemeal fashion to protect settlements along the river from occasional flooding eventually created a network of parallel lines that effectively restricted the river's channel and allowed accelerated build-up on the banks. The major spate of construction along the river's west bank before the Asian Games of 1982 was accompanied by the spread of squatter settlements housing the city's working class that, with the encouragement of the government, kept expanding over the next two decades. Their subsequent eviction on the charge of pollution cleared the way for the construction of capital-intensive projects of urban infrastructure and elite consumption. These projects give material shape to Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit's vision of riverfront development that mimics other "world-class" cities. Dikshit has frequently mooted the idea of channelising the river in a manner resembling the Thames in London and the Seine in Paris, with the river fitting into the cityscape as a site of recreation and leisure, with cultural performances and other modes of public consumption. This seemingly benign project of creating the riverfront as a public space, one that may forge a relationship between the river and the residents of Delhi, elides key issues, social and ecological. One, this space will not really be open to the "public" for the direction of its redistribution already shows that it favours corporate capital and private and elite public modes of consumption. Not only will these new spaces exclude most residents of the city but, in fact, have already done so – the land made available for the new developments has been taken from farmers and by evicting hundreds of thousands of poor slum-dwellers who had previously occupied that land.

It must also be borne in mind that the Yamuna is not the Thames or the Seine. Its distinctive rhythms are harmonised to the Indian subcontinent's seasons. With the bulk of its flow concentrated in the monsoons, the Yamuna is liable to breach its embankments if deprived of its present fertile expanse. While the floods in Mumbai and New Orleans (Kelman 2003) are recent examples of the hazards of building in a river's floodplain, the residents of north Delhi and the Pushta have also experienced the risks of a swiftly-rising river. The vast stretches of riverbed revealed in the summer months may lure developers, but the line between land and water is swiftly dissolved once the rains come. As Mike Davis (1999) reminds us, nature is not a stable backdrop against which humans can orchestrate their affairs. Natural processes have their own dynamism and integrity must be borne in mind lest world-class ambitions founder on the fluvial bed of the Yamuna.

The spatial and temporal flow of the Yamuna through Delhi shows the fluctuating fortunes of urban ecology as a concern in the cultural politics of the city. In 2009, the ecological value of the floodplain was comprehensively dismissed by the Supreme Court's declaration that the area along the river was neither a riverbed nor a floodplain and could be incorporated into a regime of commodity value as real estate. However, the floods of 2010 challenged that assertion, reminding the city of the presence of a river in their midst, an ecological entity that could not be fully controlled and that demanded its natural due. In this essay, I have tried to show that the contestations over the Yamuna are not merely another inevitable instance of the enclosure of the commons, a historical accompaniment to the onward march of capitalism (Thompson 1977), or of "accumulation by dispossession" in an age of "new imperialism" (Harvey 2003). Though they do fit within the wider pattern of accumulation going on in contemporary India, the processes that have rendered the riverfront a place of commodified value are also anchored in a longer-standing set of aesthetic values associated with modernity (Glover 2008). These values made the riverfront a non-place inhabited by non-people, illegible as either nature or culture. Among the many intersecting ways of making nature recognisable as a place of value – spectacular scenery, charismatic mega-fauna, religious significance, national prestige – commodification is only one (Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan 2005; Davis 1995). It is the conjuncture with the period of liberalisation that has enabled the emergence of commodity aesthetics as the dominant form of imparting value to the river, allowing the Yamuna to be seen and imagined as a desirable place. However, the floods assert a contrary doctrine, reiterating the force of ecological limits, and emphasising that the floodplain of the Yamuna continues to be a place that defies commodification and thus defines the limits of capital.

NOTES

1 George Berkeley (1710): "A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge" (proposition 45) argued that "The Objects of Sense Exist Only When They Are Perceived", viewed on 20 June 2011 (http://philosophy.eserver.org/berkeley.html). This comment on perception and the production of nature is not to deny the substantive materiality of the river or, what the essay argues for, the fact that nature exceeds social categories and framings. I am grateful to Vinay Gidwani for helping clarify this point.

2 The Sanskrit term for a place of pilgrimage, tirtha, originally meant "Ford" or "Crossing Place" and sacred riverbank sites like the Ganga at Banaras represent spiritual fording, the soul's journey from the obstacles of this world to the next (Eck 1982). This metaphysical aspect of a river underlies the Hindu practice of using ghats or the built-up steps leading down to the water, as sites to cremate the dead.

3 On the mutual constitution of place and nature, see Raffles (1999).

4 Interviewed on 21 November 2007.

5 The two cow shelters close to the river, with their herds of infirm and injured cattle, offer a similar opportunity to the devout.

6 Interviewed on 23 November 2007.

7 Interviewed on 25 November 2007.

8 See the 2003 study "Heavy Metal Contamination of Vegetables in Delhi", viewed on 25 June 2011 (http://old.cseindia.org/programme/health/pdf/conf2006/toxins2_aggarwal2.pdf). Other studies on Yamuna water pollution in Delhi and critical appraisals of the efforts to clean the river can be found online at the Centre for Science and Environment website, viewed on 25 June 2011 (http://www.cseindia.org/taxonomy/term/ 5050). For an ongoing commentary on the Yamuna's condition, with biographical musings and photographs, see Ravi Agarwal's engaging blog, viewed on 25 June 2011 (http://haveyouseen theriver. blogspot.com).

9 Interviewed on 21 November 2007.

10 This Hindi aphorism is particularly apt on this occasion. Literally, it means that "The Ganga is Flowing Backwards", or a state that violates the natural order of things.

11 In her book *Unsettling Memories* (2002), anthropologist Emma Tarlo persuasively argues that, during the Emergency, the state's desire to discipline poor people's lives in urban spaces extended to an invasion of their bodies as well. Tarlo shows that the project of urban beautification via slum evictions was linked to the project of population control via forced sterilisation. Displaced slum-dwellers were more likely to get resettlement plots on the edge of the city if they got themselves sterilised or if they could prove that they had "motivated" someone to get a vasectomy or tubectomy. In the archives of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA),

several files pertaining to the allotment of individual housing plots included certificates of sterilisation to strengthen the claimant's case.

12 The body responsible for planning and regulating land use in the capital.

13 This crisis narrative involving national prestige, tight deadlines and the imperative of creating major infrastructural and aesthetic changes in the city, which legitimises massive public expenditure without adequate oversight, was replayed in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games 2010 (Baviskar 2010).

14 In 2004, Hazards Centre, an organisation researching urban issues from the viewpoint of working-class citizens, attempted to calculate the total quantum of liquid waste generated by areas equipped with sewage lines as well as those without. According to their report, 3,296 million litres of wastewater are released into the Yamuna in Delhi every day. Their analysis estimated that the Yamuna Pushta bastis contributed only 2.96 million litres a day (or less than 0.1%) to the total waste flowing into the river. Yet, the Pushta settlements were targeted for eviction while no action was taken against the *pucca* neighbourhoods that generated the bulk of domestic sewage.

15 The regularity with which judicial attempts to address pollution in the Yamuna have targeted the wrong offenders while ignoring systemic problems and letting state officials off the hook, condoning failure despite more than Rs 13.56 billion being spent on the Yamuna Action Plan, indicates the anti-poor prejudice driving the recent judicial activism (Ramanathan 2006).

16 The metro depot uses groundwater pumped from the riverbed and discharges waste, including chemicals used in train maintenance, directly into the river (Bharucha 2006). The most recent reports indicate that the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) has plans of building a theme park on 15,000 square metres of another riverfront station, Shastri Park. See report "DMRC Theme Park", viewed on 30 July 2011 (http://www.yamunajiyeabhiyan.blogspot.com/).

17 Interviewed on 13 April 2004.

18 Interviewed on 12 April 2004.

19 In 2008, the Delhi government announced that it had built 60,000 flats for the urban poor, a claim that was later found to be completely false. An enquiry found that, by 2009, only 7,635 of these flats had been built and another 5,227 were under construction. See "Lokayukta Ticks off Sheila for False Claim over Flats for Poor", *The Hindu*, 19 July 2011, viewed on 19 July 2011 (http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/article2249115.ece).

20 The move of ignoring or exterminating original settlers and then claiming their land as one's territory is, of course, a familiar story in the history of colonialism (Carter 1987; Wilmsen 1989). However, it continues in attenuated forms into the present, through time-tested tactics such as criminalising the poor for survival practices that are a product of state-imposed restrictions.

21 Writ petition, viewed on 23 July 2011 (www.elaw.org/system/files/Petition+-+final+version.doc). For other documents related to Yamuna pollution and construction on the riverbed, see Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan, viewed on 23 July 2011 (http://www.yamunajiyeabhiyaan.blogspot.com).

22 "DDA gives Rs 500 crore loan to Emaar MGF", *Economic Times*, 13 September 2009, viewed on 7 October 2009 (http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/Features/The-Sunday-ET/Companies/Emaar-MGFs-32-flats-in-games-village-to-be-ready-by-October/articleshow/5004556.cms). This arrangement directly contradicted the urban development ministry's previously held position that there was no provision for extending a loan to the contractor under the PPP model. See statement by urban development secretary, M Ramachandran, in "DDA might bail out Emaar", *Indian Express*, 8 January 2009, viewed on 7 October 2009 (http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/games-village-dda-might-bail-out-emaar/408094/).

23 For an instructive discussion of the contrast between the "commons" and "commodities", see Bakker (2007) and Linebaugh (2009).

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