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WATER MANUFACTORY

Ravi Agarwal

Nature has been colonized, institutionalized and privatized. Since it is also a resource, the relationship to it has been externalized and monetized. However, it is hard to say where 'we' end and 'nature' begins. Nature has also been categorized as air, water, soil, earth, etc. These separations are but extensions of its 'usage value' that we perceive.



From the 'Riverbank Installations', 2007

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Our understanding of it has been largely reduced to an extension of our own needs. Nature has become about 'us,' and we mostly imagine it only as such. These engagements with 'nature' have been determined by our own ideas, social divisions, imaginations and economics. We have only tried to control it, and not recognized our co-dependency with it. It truly is now the age of the anthropocene.

In many ways, the idea of nature is a manufactured one.

Nature as water is fundamental to life. It is part of a planetary commons. It is also a human right. However, the degree to which we equitably share this life-giving resource, amongst ourselves and with other species on the planet, has become a political and ethical question. It reflects as an idea of democracy. Poverty and water access are interlinked. Over 85% of all humans live in arid areas on this planet and two thirds of them earn less than USD 2 per day. Even in a city like Delhi, the capital of the largest democracy in the world, some people have access to over 300 liters of water per day, whilst others receive less than 30! The difference can be analysed in terms of neighborhoods separated by social and political class.

Water has an immediacy. When one is thirsty, one has to drink water- it cannot wait. It is an urgent need, like air.

Yet over 700 million people do not have access to safe drinking water. Some, mostly women and children spend hours everyday trying to fetch it from afar, like in many villages in India, often having to walk more than 3.5 miles everyday for it. As the relationship between health, diseases and sanitation became clear in the nineteenth century, water systems became key to urbanization and sanitation. Water and sanitation systems were piped to individual households. However even today, over 2.5 billion people do not have access to sanitation globally. Most of them are economically poor.

Commodity

Water has become a privatized commodity. It is no longer thought of as part of the 'commons.' For example, the global bottle water industry is worth over 100 billion USD. It has sold the myth that tap water is unsafe (even in developed countries such as the USA), even though much of bottled water comes straight from natural sources. This modern myth lands these companies a 500% profit on every liter of tap water! In Asian

cities, water wields clout. For example, private water mafias steal and sell water through tankers and simultaneously prevent the city laying water pipes for those to whom they supply the water.

The scarcity of water is used for political gains. It causes inter-boundary treaties/disputes of water sharing. India has unresolved water disputes with its neighbors Pakistan (the Indus river system) and Bangladesh (river Ganges and branches), and new ones emerging with China (river Brahmaputra). Strategists hint at coming water wars.

Virtual Water

Water, food and trade are interlinked. Agriculture uses a major chunk of the planet's freshwater (almost 75%). This is never priced for in trade equations. With global trade becoming the defining feature of globalized economies, food is more freely traded. A handful of corporations control the bulk of food commodity trade. For example 20 of them control the coffee trade, and a mere six hold 70 percent of the wheat trade. However when food is exported, it is actually exporting 'virtual' water, or the local water needed to produce the crop – whose costs and implications are locally borne. Farmers in India have for centuries depended on monsoons to grow crops and the government provides them free water and electricity for irrigating them. Also new dietary shifts to meat and dairy, are more water intensive – for e.g., 1kg of beef needs about 16,000 liters of fresh water to produce. Water is being traded, unseen, unpriced and causing local impacts which are largely unrecognized.

Water stress

Even though we use most of the water in farming, most of its toxicity comes from industrial use. The river Ganga is toxic from less than 20% of its pollution coming from industrial sources. Toxic water can cross-contaminate food. As water supplies become stressed (owing to climate change and overuse) as glaciers recede, rivers dry up and rainfall patterns change, surface waters are becoming inadequate for meeting basic needs like drinking and washing. Mining the pre-historic and irreplaceable reserve of groundwater, has become the next source. It's like eating into capital.

What is less recognized is the inextricable link between water, energy and food. It is almost impossible to separate one from the other. Water produces energy through hydro-power and

the sun. Water produces energy through its power and consumes energy to transport and clean it. Energy is key to the way we have defined 'progress' and 'development' and water is to energy through its flows, currents, weather, monsoons and climate.

Eco-systems

It is a mistake to treat water-carrying systems like rivers, as mere water bodies. They are eco-systems. In fact, in places such as India, they are also cultural and mythological bodies. Rivers nourish and harbor complex ecologies / mythologies of life. When one dams a river, it is not only a water flow one interferes with, it is the web of life itself - fish, flora, fauna, and their relationships with local culture. We do not know enough about them, and hence strike in the dark. Which fish swim where, to feed, spawn or live? Our pathetic answer is creating fish ladders! When such linkages are broken, they are almost impossible to fix.

Institutionalization

Since the early nineteenth century we have institutionalized rivers as 'water channels.' They have become the realm of engineers and planners. Our technological understandings of rivers, dams and barrages have been limited to understanding water flows, through hydrology, but not as ecologies. Hence the debate is reduced to controlling water. Engineers feel that water flowing into the ocean through rivers is 'wasted', and hence must be tapped and 'used'. But they do not understand that rivers only exist owing to water flows. Playing around with river basins, by inter-basin transfers, channelization, damming, riverbank constructions, sand dredging etc. has caused floods and ecological destruction.

In India, they are currently planning 70 dams upstream on its largest river - the Ganges. If they do that, the river will run dry downstream. However how much water must flow in the river for it to remain one? What is an 'ecological' flow? That remains an unanswered question - where technologists have not dared to venture. The environmental impact assessment they rely upon has no tools to measure ecology and culture! Such has been our reduced and simplistic understanding of 'nature,' in the history of ideas.

Colonisation

Colonisation led to the destruction of traditional knowledge about water and how it was treated as part of the 'commons'. In

earlier times water was a community resource, shared through farmer's water sharing agreements. As water supplies became more state controlled, especially post colonization in countries like India, and agriculture more commodified, these agreements became defunct. People who lived in the Rajasthan desert, had developed water storage systems based on precipitation and sporadic rain. Deep community wells were sacrosanct and worshipped. These have disappeared or gone into disrepair.

Water was 'local' not 'global.'

Mythology

Through time, ancient texts, from where myths of nature originate, have revered water, the rivers and oceans. They acknowledged the primacy of water on our planet, as foundations and holders of life. Our co-dependency has not shifted very much beyond that. Even though we know much more about its atomic structure and its management, we are still looking for water on other planets as a basic sign of life.

Complexity

Like science and technology cannot be separated from 'nature', similarly culture, faith and rationality can co-exist, often in the same person. Hence for years one of the most vociferous campaigners (Prof. V.B.

Mishra) for Ganges conservation (a river which harbors over 300 million people along its banks), was a head priest of the largest temple in the traditional and holy city of Varanasi, but who was also Professor of Hydrology at the prestigious local Institute of Technology. He would measure the pollution in the river each morning and take a bath in it in the evening, fully aware of the ecoli count! Science and faith! This separation was not only a separation of thought, but a separation of the material and 'non-material,' the idea of immediate and cosmic time, and also of the self and the 'other.' He simultaneously developed a scientific plan for the river cleanup, campaigned politically with the corrupt local government, and lectured internationally.



From the 'Alien Waters' series, 2004-2006

Such complex imaginations reflect the multiple existences of water, nature and self. In some ways these multiple layers and

understandings are not uncommon, though unrecognized or spoken about. The neat divisions of 'knowledge' disciplines, whose methodologies are key to 'knowledge' production in the scientific world, can actually be very messy, intertwined, and interlinked.

The 'knowledge' this chaos produces is tentative, uncertain, and argumentative.

Maybe it better reflects the true nature of our existence.

Engagements with Water

Based on a 2011 video interview by Kathryn Myers from the series "Regarding India, Conversations With Artists".

I find water fascinating, especially flowing water, and it draws me into another space. There is this part of me that wants to be somewhere else, not in the material world, and there is also a part of me which is very engaged with what's happening in its sociopolitical dimensions - and these interplay constantly.

We have to be able to live in a complex world, and so the river is not only a view, the river is also culture, its also mythology, it's also relationships, it's also water, it's also livelihood, and how do we then create a river in a city which has all these things intact? I think this is something we seem to have forgotten. We are now trying to recover the river as real-estate and have nature as a view. You know you talk to someone about the river and they say "the river is dead."

I talked to a friend and said I'm doing this project on the river and he said, "What project, the river is dead?."

I said, "No you go there, it's very much alive, there are people who live there and they have a fine life, so it's not dead, it's your imagination which is dead!"



From the 'Alien Water' series

The “Alien Waters” (2004-2006) work came from a desire to seek a personal space and I wanted to seek out spaces which I was familiar with, in a sense it becomes my new companion.



**From the
'Immersion.Emergence'
series**

The “Immersion.Emergence” (2007) work was the last series of work I did in that “Alien Waters” body of work. To me it was a personal inscription of my own location. That while the river was dying, and the shroud is the symbol of the dead, I’m standing and I’m not dead.

It’s also that the first water you have when you’re born as a Hindu is the water of the river and when you die you are immersed in the river, so there is this ongoing mythology of the constant cycle of life and death and the river is very much part of it. So it’s been written about in different ways, aesthetic, political. It could all be true or not be true, I don’t know, but in a sense I brought myself to that moment.

The “Flowers” work (Have You Seen the Flowers on the River, 2007-2011) came subsequently, after an invitation to do a residency at the Khoj Artists’ Association in Delhi. To me it was a very important residency because I ended up expanding my language. If you’ve grown up as a classical street photographer and never been to art school then you’re not exposed to anything but the language of photography, and here you find that you are free to use so many languages. So I went upstream, which is still surprisingly in the city, because half the river is black and half the river is blue, and as I went upstream I saw these gorgeous flower fields, and they were just so beautiful.

I’m very interested in not only the aesthetics, but what’s going on. And so I became like an amateur anthropologist, an amateur economist, and discovered the whole dynamics of land and land change. Part of the work is to bring the multiple identities of the river alive through the real people. How do you make the city recognize that the river is not just a water channel which needs to be cleaned? It’s a whole body of culture, of mythology,

needs to be cleaned: it's a whole body of culture, of mythology, and of life, and of ecology. Lack of imagination, our inability to imagine something in its entirety that we come to very narrow understandings and come up with this "oh this is good for the environment even if it's bad for livelihood". We cannot, this is not the way, this holistic approach has to be there.

Landscapes of water

You can see that a lot of my work deals with opening up landscapes that are much more complex than what we might imagine. It's a complex reality that we live in and somehow in our institutional policies and public imaginations we are shy of this complex reality, so we'll say "it's good if it's science, but it's bad if it's belief," but we are both, science is part of our knowing, but also our not knowing is part of our knowing. Somehow we have taken science to be the new religion and science is always in doubt by its very nature. But when we have displaced the traditional religions, we now build this idea of science as the new religion.

I know a priest who lives on the river, and the river is very dirty, and every day at 4:00 he will take a bath.

I said, "Why do you take a bath, the river is so dirty?"

He said, "This is my mother, I've been doing this for the last forty years, I'm fine, nothing has happened to me, I have faith in this river."

Now, who am I to deny him that faith, and who understands that faith? So I don't want to say that faith is good or that science is bad, I just want to say that it is complicated.

Nature?



I'm in deep concern about what is this nature we have constructed, and is the only way we relate to nature through the aesthetics of it? There are so many readings of nature, but somehow the only way we can deal with nature right now is through some kind of category like this, and I'm concerned that if we then have no other ways of dealing with nature, are we predetermining its future, its destruction.

**Scene of the Crime Series
(2011)**

These are all self-portraits, self shot self-portrait images done for a show on Gandhi.

It's about a search for three essential parts of a personal truth or a personal search, and I don't know where to

find it. In one there is this little white boat which can take me across the river, the river as a metaphoric journey of life, then this red thing of this violence, of this political sphere, and I'm running away from both saying,

"I don't want redemption, I don't want to be political, where should I go, without religion and politics, where should I turn?"

And so some of this came from this complete uncertainty of where we are and who we are and I think in some ways I try to find form for that uncertainty, and I'm uncertain about the future. I don't have a didactic position as you might say an activist should have where I know what is good. I don't know what is good. It's the same thing with the new urbanization; I don't know what is good. There is both a sense of personal loss and despair, but I also see many hopes in that space from many people's eyes. I'm interested in this idea of uncertainty and so it's an attempt at that. It's not that I will know the answer, but it's the struggle of knowing the answer, which makes me human.



River from the 'Scene Of The Crime' series



**The Yamuna-Elbe Public
Art Project (2011).**

In this twin city project, which I co-curated along



***Yamuna Manifesto*, ed. Ravi Agarwal & Till Krause, Goethe Institute and Toxics Link (New Delhi, 2013)**

with Till Krause, in Hamburg and Delhi, we wanted to address the idea of rivers as ecologies. The central questions were:

- a. does progress answer the question of ecology?
- b. what happens if one replaces economy with ecology?
- c. how does the land appear from the river?



River Markers from the '1/2 Ecology(ies)' series, 2014

We wanted to think of the institutionalization of rivers, suggest a new relationship with them based on co-existence rather than exploitation, and question the idea of economic growth that although based on a natural resource like water, treats it like an externality.

It resulted in artists' engagements in the two cities and engaged with the differing discourses about them in Hamburg and Delhi, in an attempt to help rethink them. A *Yamuna Manifesto* has been published as one of the outcomes.



View of 'Project Y', Yamuna-Elbe public art project, 2011

The engagements continue.

Musings

The aesthetic experience is a strong part of being an artist, it's an important part. It's not only about a fixed idea of beauty, you

an important part. It's not only about a fixed idea of beauty, you can find beauty in almost anything. I found the sewage pond (The Sewage Pond's Memoir, 2013) fascinatingly beautiful and it was completely polluted. The tar machines (Tar Machines series, 2013) were machines I had encountered one morning when I was going for a drive along the river and they looked so alive.

I was trained in science, formally trained in science, but I also know that my aesthetic experience is outside of science. All this work had a very strong aesthetic connection and it's a very important part of how I work. There is an inherent sense of great beauty in that moment for me.



From the 'After The Flood' series, 2011

It's very pleasurable to be encountering and taking those pictures, it's what draws me back again and again and again, to just re-experience, it's an orgasmic kind of thing, you want to experience it again, you feel so excited and it's such a high for you, suddenly you found something you connect with and I think that's the nicest part of what always drew me to photography since I was thirteen years old. It is this moment that draws me, if this moment was not there I would stop doing it, it would have no meaning for me.

I'm often asked, if I am artist, activist or both. This is not a real division. Ultimately, if you are in the doing of things then you can be a campaigner, an activist, you can be an artist all at the same time because you are constantly doing something which you think should be done.

New Delhi, March 2015

RAVI AGARWAL is an artist, environmental activist, writer and curator living in New Delhi. Trained as an engineer, he has engaged his art practice integrally with his other pursuits as

founder of the NGO *Toxics Link* (toxicslink.org), one of India's leading environmental, non-profit organizations. In addition to writing extensively on ecological issues, his artistic practice has encompassed photography, video, and installation, integrating science, politics, and explorations of self, as 'personal ecologies'. By merging social documentary and environmental activism, his resistance to ecological and environmental depletion adds an urgency to work as an artist, becoming a medium in itself for his activism.

Agarwal has shown in international shows including *Documenta XI* (2002) Kassel, Germany, *Horn Please* (Berne 2007), *Indian Highway* (2009), *Sharjah Biennial* (2013), as well as several national shows and solo shows.

Agarwal recently co-curated a twin-city public art show, *Yamuna-Elbe Public Art Outreach* (2011-12), a project of public art works that highlighted ecological, developmental and socio-cultural issues relating to the river Yamuna in Delhi, and the river Elbe in Hamburg.

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