



Have You Seen the Flowers on the River?

Ravi Agarwal



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While the City Loses Its Flowers...

In her essay *Beyond the Beauty Strip*, well known art critic Lucy Lippard wrote, “It’s a challenge for even the most expansive art forms to dispense with the frame, but it may be possible to change frames on the spot, offering a set of multiple views of the ways a space or place can be, or is used, what its components are, how to read the land.”

The invitation by Khoj to two Delhi-based artists in January 2007 for a month-long residency, loosely termed ‘ecology + art’, attempted to do just that: offer a set of multiple views on ‘how to read the land’, where land may be read in the sense of ‘a territory or a chunk of Earth, land in the sense of landlord,... to land marks, promised lands, landscapes, land grabs, land reform, landfills or even land mines’, a word in which the two trajectories of art and ecology could meet¹.

The early work by Agarwal, a reputed photographer and the director of an environmental NGO, was a documentary photographic series of the river Yamuna called *Alien Waters*. Photographing the river, he wrote ominously, “The river is in the city’s margins. It is very dirty, filthy. The city does not need it any more. Its future is pre-configured, the river is ‘dead’. It will now be cleaned but not like a life-giving artery, but a sparkling necklace, adorning a new globality of the city...” The work mirrored the darkness of the text.

This residency, however, saw Agarwal push in a different direction altogether. Launched with a public orientation—a picnic—on the one unpolluted section of the Yamuna in rural Jagatpur in the north of Delhi city, the ‘picnic’ was a reminder of the possibility of what the river could be. Black-headed gulls flying over a translucent river made for a river of the imagination—in stark opposition to the sewer that the river has become as it flows through the city. That such a place of beauty could exist within the seething interstices of the city was a shock. The picnic—a gesture of promise.

While the 42-km-long river has 18 drains which dump over 3,000 million litres of municipal and industrial sewage into it, making it black along half its length, it is simultaneously a fecund site with vegetables and flowers growing along its bank, even as priests and worshippers take a holy dip in its dark depths. The Yamuna, daughter of the Hindu god of death, is all—love, life and death.

Working as part anthropologist, part economist, part artist, Agarwal’s focus was on the life the river spawned. Through interviews with the village community, he unraveled the self-sustaining micro economies that underpin the vast stretches of the lush marigold fields on the banks of the river. What emerged was a series of art projects which matched the intensity of the process. These included three site-specific installations, a series of photographs of the flower economy, and a video that tracked the plucking of the marigold flower, that ubiquitous flower which is part of everyday living in India—in every household, temple and cremation ground, adorning the gods and the dead alike.

“Often the flowers land up back in the river as decaying garbage and debris,” says Agarwal. “(The marigold fields show) a sustainable use of land, and a sustainable livelihood alongside a clean and healthy environment. The Government, however, is acquiring thousands of acres of fertile land by the riverbed from the farmers to build concrete stadiums, temples and with the 2010 Commonwealth Games around the corner, a Commonwealth Games Village.” Deeply disruptive, the farmers and villagers will lose a sustainable livelihood while, Agarwal mourns, the city loses its flowers.

While Agarwal’s video (his first)—of the women’s nimble fingers plucking the flowers and leaving behind a bare field has an immediacy that is prescient of things to come, his installation of knives in the sand is a brutal telling of the rapidly changing story of the river bank. Pursuing his new-found strategy of community interaction, the artist invited an ‘exchange’ with the city through photographing household sinks and inviting people to learn about the river through his blog, haveyouseenthe river.blogspot.com. Agarwal was able thus to ‘change frames’, both personally and for his viewers.

Khoj sees itself as a laboratory: a space for the incubation of ideas and intense experimentation, where an artist is invited to push practice and form. That Agarwal was able to create a diverse body of work, some of which has circulated widely internationally, speaks amply for the intensity of this encounter. But perhaps what is of greater value is the continued impetus that the residency experience has given Agarwal’s practice which now embraces video, text and the performative.

Pooja Sood
Director, Khoj International Artists’ Association
New Delhi

¹ *Land, Art: A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, Introduction,
Max Andrews (ed), Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, UK





Have You Seen the Flowers on the River?

The river. It is not just a water body flowing through the city, but a network of myriad relationships—interconnected to the city and its people, *and* to nature. Each connection, an exchange and interchange, where the wise fathomless waters give as much as can be received. The city slumbers along, unaware of the river, of its giving, and oblivious of the deep connections which exist. The river flows on, passing through rural land into a densely urbanized Delhi. Vegetables, flowers, water, sand and livelihoods give way to concrete, dirt, filth, criss-crossed roads and displaced unconnected lives. Peace, quietude, tranquility, are exchanged for fragmented pedestrian walks and loud blaring noises. Drinking water becomes sewage. Life becomes death.

SITES OF EXCHANGE: FLOWER FIELDS AND SINKS

On the river itself, before the city hits it, the flower fields are where marigolds grow. People make a living off them. The ‘beauty’ of the flower is its exchange value. Aesthetics as livelihood. The river brings along fertile soil, and charges the groundwater. It lends its sandy riverbed, and lets itself be transformed into a site for new crops and cultivation.

One acre of land can yield over 15 tonnes of flowers—*zafris*, *basantis* and *gaindas*—all in a seven- to nine-month season of flowers. They are grown and plucked by families and relatives together, and sold in the over 200-year-old Fatehpuri mandi in Old Delhi. Here, at one of the largest wholesale flower markets in North India, tonnes of flowers are sold each morning in a matter of a few hours. From here they travel to adorn temples and homes, truck bonnets and women’s plaits, becoming part of weddings and funerals. Often they land back onto the river bank, as decaying garbage. Immersion.

The city uses water from the river, and throws it back as sewage. Each tap in the city of 15 million is literally connected to the river’s water. As the river becomes dirty and polluted, the city is unconscious of its own role in making it so. Over 3,000 million litres of sewage finds its way into the river from sinks, bathtubs, sewage tanks and pipes, each day.



The local economy of the flower fields is based on the fertility of its land. The ‘new’ land is now much in demand by the exploding city, imbued with a global desire. Land near the flower fields is priced at over three lakh rupees an acre. Selling it could make more money than growing flowers or vegetables. The riverbed is increasingly acquired for building stadiums, large temples and now the Commonwealth Games Village. The fertility of capital overtakes the fertility of land. Land and ecology are inseparable, as is the relationship between the ecology of nature and the ecology of the ‘self’. The changing ecology of the flower fields is the crumbling ecology of the ‘self’ in these times.

The script seems pre-written. The river is timeless. The river is dead.



The place we visited last week is now under water. There is no land visible, only rippling water. Land has value only as long as it is visible. Ebb and flow. Transience. “It’s a gamble,” smiles Pratap, who owns this fleeting land. He has seen this too often and for too long. Meanwhile he and his family lead lives of simple subsistence: buffaloes for milk, land for fodder and their own field’s grain for food. Complete and independent. Almost.

The river has been fenced! All along its banks at Okhla, my earlier site for taking pictures of junk and junkmen, cobblers and tailors, fish and fishermen are now inaccessible, to be tiled and cleaned. All this in a matter of a few months. In another few, more will change, and then these pictures will already be of a bygone time. Land and its relationship with people has changed. Commercial value rules the roost. Where will the flowers go? Change is imminent. Of course. But on what terms? And at what price?

Where will the flowers go?



THE FLOWER MANDI AT FATEHPURI, JAN 18, 2007

Fatehpuri at 8 am is a flurry of activity. The day is already two hours old for the flower sellers, as they lay out their perishable wares in 10 kg bundles. “From the riverbank,” they say of the *zafris* I saw growing yesterday on the waters. The *gairdas* come later in April. “What you see here are not from Delhi but from Uttar Pradesh.” By 10 am they will be all gone, several tonnes of glorious sunlight-yellow flowers, all without stalks and all used for making garlands, to be used as decorations for festivities. I wonder how old this association is, how flowers—especially these flowers—came to be part of auspicious events.

“Let us not flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory, it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expect, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people, who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere, destroy the forest to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that by removing along with the forests the collecting centre and reservoirs of moisture they were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of those countries. When the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests on the southern slopes, so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry of their region; they had still less inkling that they were thereby depriving their mountain springs of more furious torrents on the plains during the rainy season....

Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage of all other creatures on being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly.”

Nikolai Bukharin



Installation

Violence.

Politicians have already expressed alarm over the snail-paced development of the riverbank construction for the 1.5 billion dollar sports event, the Commonwealth Games of 2010. Environmentalists have bemoaned the folly of this. It is a lost battle.

Environmental clearances have been forced through. Science has been ignored. Laws have become inconvenient. Only glory beckons. The glory of one glittering moment. Only the Romans know about arrogance, the fall and the fading. The river does too.

The sandy banks are being impaled by steel and pounded by massive mechanical hammers. Water needs no violence. It quietly accommodates and flows around—when it is allowed to. The concrete will make it impossible for the water to sink into the ground, or to bring fertile soil onto its banks.

The river yields its land to the concrete. It will wait till this too has passed. As mountains have become valleys and deserts turned into marshes, what then of mere manmade metal? Or of man. Or is it different this time? Is it the final battle—of man and nature? Where victory has been declared before the war is over.

Only the river knows. Maybe.



However, the threat of change hangs heavy on the fields now. The Delhi Assembly is debating that all 'rural' land be now urbanized, changed into concrete and mortar. The Delhi Development Authority is proposing that the river be channelized into a concrete drain and that construction be allowed on either side. Land is priceless in Delhi and the flowers redundant. There are big plans afoot.





The Flower Exchange

I have invited my friends to be part of the residency. If they let me shoot their sinks, that is. In exchange, they receive a poster with this blogsite (haveyouseentheriver.blogspot.com) on it, so that they can visit the river with me. Many of them have never been on the river; in fact, most would not even know how to get there! While flowers flow from the river to the city, wastewater flows from the city to the river.



The Sustainable Flower Economy: How Long?

Each acre of land is fertile for flowers for seven months of the year, from October to April. During that time it yields an increasing amount of flowers as the season progresses, starting from 10 sacks a week to over 20 sacks a week. Each sackful holds about 20 kg of flowers and, in a good year, sells for 100 to 150 rupees. So in a good season one can expect 500 to 700 sacks of *zafri*, *basanti* and *gairda* flowers, approximating 10 to 15 tonnes. This amounts to a revenue of 8,000 to 9,000 rupees per month per acre, perhaps half of which would go towards expenses. A sustainable use of land and a sustainable livelihood, alongside a clean and healthy environment.

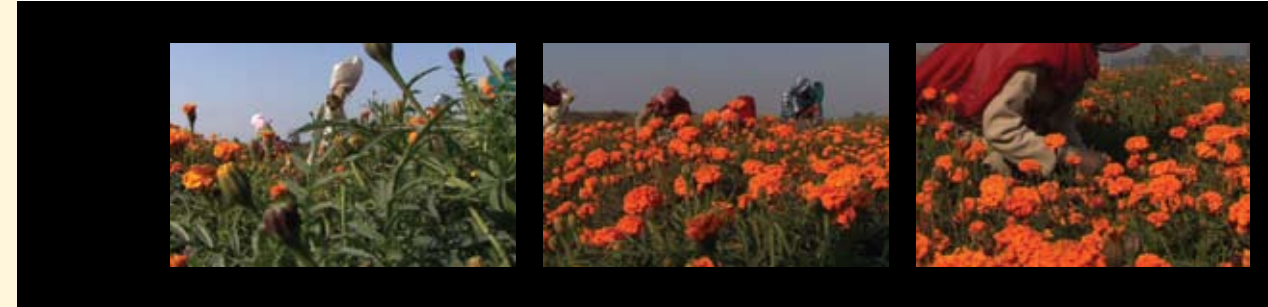
In the remaining five months of the year, fruit and vegetables are also grown – cauliflower, tomato, spinach, radish, melon, *kakri*, even wheat and sugarcane.

It's mostly the women in a family who pluck the flowers. Groups of four or five relatives, or neighbours, working four to six hours a day, besides doing their housework and looking after the children. There will also be a man on the field, for often the flowers are sold as they are plucked with buyers lining up for the fresh produce. On any particular field, the flower-pluckers seem like a well-knit group. They chatter away with tales from the day, with stories of the chores within. It is also a social time. Each field is plucked once a week.

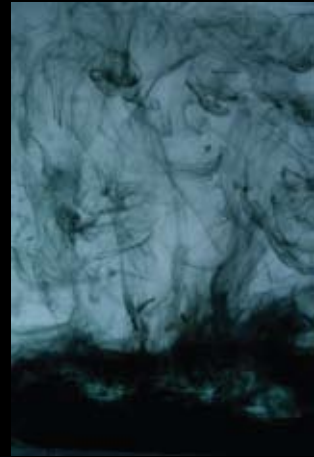
Not every flower-plucker owns land. Many also lease it for an annual rate of 10,000 to 15,000 rupees each year, with all inputs, raw materials and profit devolving on the farmer.

Along the river, land is divided along community lines. Near the village of Hiranki, about 7 km from Jagatpur, the farmers are from Haryana and speak Haryanvi. Further down, near Palla village, is the village of Jagrolla. This is inhabited mostly by Sikh families and the women on the field speak hard-to-understand Punjabi. Some farms also seem very affluent – a luxury car like a Chevrolet or a Honda can often be seen parked there.

The Flower Pluckers, Video, 3 mins



Polluted Waters, Slide Video, 2.5 mins



Sprouts



Decay.

It needs no help. Life prospers on its own. The seeds sprout without fertilizer or chemicals. Without knowledge or philosophy. Without religion or beliefs. Sprouting happens. It is.

The seeds I threw into a fish tank, into the river's sand, sprouted on their own; in the river sand irrigated only with the river's water. In a few weeks they had taken root.

Was the seed meant to be more than this? Must our desire to experience overtake everything else? Other lives, other life forms? Will greater 'knowledge' lead to our perpetuity, and if so what kind of perpetuity will it be? These are not questions which can be answered definitively. However, they have to be asked, for they are present. Real knowledge must raise real questions, and must be humbled by them. It is the rudder of where we go and why we go there.

It is both our trap and our emancipation.

The river forced me to ask and led me to see.

Nature is. We are. Who are we?

Ravi Agarwal

Lives and works in New Delhi.

Ravi Agarwal has pursued photography integrally with his practice as an environmentalist. His earlier work, in the documentary oeuvre, encompasses 'nature', 'work,' 'labour,' and the 'street,' while more recent work has been traversing questions of the self, based on explorations of 'personal ecologies'. He now works with photography, video and installation. He trained as an engineer.

Solo Shows

- 2008 *An Other Place*, Gallery Espace, New Delhi
2006 *Alien Waters*, India International Centre, New Delhi
2000 *Down and Out*, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi; the Hutheesingh Visual Arts Gallery, Ahmedabad; National Vakbondsmuseum, Amsterdam
1995 *A Street View*, All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi

Selected Curated Group/Residency Exhibitions

- 2008 *Extinct*, curated Pooja Sood, 48 deg C, Public Eco-Art International festival, New Delhi
2008/2009 *Indian Highway*, curated Julia Peyton-Jones, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Gunnar Kvaran, travelling exhibition, Serpentine Gallery, London (2008), Astrep Fernley Museum, Oslo (2009)
2008 *Still/Moving Image*, curated Deeksha Nath, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
2008 *Click! Contemporary Photography in India*, curated Sunil Gupta and Radhika Singh, Vadehra Gallery, New Delhi
2007 *Horn Please, The Narrative in Contemporary Indian Art*, curated Bernhard Fibicher, Suman Gopinath, Kunstmuseum, Bern
2007 *Public Places, Private Spaces*, curated Gayatri Sinha, Zetta Emmons, Newark Museum, Newark and Minneapolis (2008), USA

- 2006 *Watching Me Watching India*, curated Gayatri Sinha and Celina Lunsford, Frankfurt Fotographie International, Frankfurt
2003 *Crossing Generations: DiVERGE: Forty years of Gallery Chemould*, curated Geeta Kapoor and Chaitanya Sambrani, National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai
2002 *Documenta 11*, curated Okwui Enzewe, Kassel
1996 *2nd Biennial of Creative Photography*, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
1995 *First National Exhibition of Photography*, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
1993 Bombay Natural History Society photo exhibition, Mumbai

Photographic Books and Catalogues

- In the Shadow of the Vulture*, 48 deg C, Public Eco Art, Goethe Institut, New Delhi, 2009
Immersion. Emergence, Youthreach, New Delhi, 2007
Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism, Oxford University Press, New Delhi and University Press, Amsterdam, 2000
Making a Difference: A Collection of Essays, ed. Rukmini Sekhar, Spic-Macay, New Delhi, 1998
Portfolios in *The India Magazine*, 1995 and 1997
Portfolio in the *First City* magazine, 2003
Monthly visual column in *First City* magazine, since Feb 2005

Selected Publications

1. 'Hi Tech Heaps, Forsaken Lives' (co-authored), *Challenging the Chip: Labor Rights and Environmental Justice in the Global Electronics Industry*, ed. Ted Smith et al, Temple University Press, USA, 2007
2. 'Standardised, Packaged, Ready for Consumption', *Sarai Reader 05: Bare Acts*, Sarai – CSDS, Delhi, 2005
3. 'Beyond Environmental Standards, from Techno-centric to People-centric Environmental Governance', *Troubled Times: Sustainable Development and Governance in the Age of Extremes*,

SDPI, Islamabad, 2006

4. 'Resisting Technology: Regaining a Personal Ecology', *Sarai Reader 03: Shaping Technologies*, 2003

5. 'Corporate Social Responsibility: A Critical Perspective from India', *Cometische Humanisering?*, Ed Tonja van den Ende et al, Humanistic University Press, Amsterdam, 2005

Other

Arts Residency, Basel, Pro Helvetia, 2009

Khoj Peers Arts Residency, 2007

IFCS-UN Special Recognition Award for Chemical Safety, 2008

Ashoka Fellowship, social entrepreneurship, 1997

Web resources

www.raviagarwal.com, www.toxicslink.org

<http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/downandout>

<http://www.documenta12.de/data/english/index.html>

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