Article

Making Space for the Better: Living by the Sacred Yamuna

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Abstract: Eviction could hold a different meaning if a home's immediate surroundings contribute to its residents' livelihood, especially for informal laborers. This paper explores the notion of the *fragility* of a home within an expanded space—the space on which a home stands and its surroundings when turned into a contested area. It specifically looks at the slum of Yamuna Pushta in Delhi, which was demolished in 2004. The act uprooted thousands of low-income families who were blamed for polluting the river. The demolition was fueled by new urban visions and planning strategies, political and capitalist ambitions, projections of national pride, and an event-driven approach camouflaged under an environmentalist concern attempting to "clean" the river. Using the photographic works of artist, curator, and activist Ravi Agarwal as a case study, this paper argues the presence of a *counternarrative* in the works, challenging the projected environmentalist discourse around the river, the slum dwellers. This study further states the *dual marginalization* of the Pushta residents and the Yamuna by critiquing the economic format of majoritarianism through the growing normalcy and agreeability of the slum demolitions by the urban non-poor disguised as the "greater good".

Keywords: art and ecology; smart cities; economic liberalization; Delhi urban planning and development; art and activism; river Yamuna; Yamuna Pushta; Commonwealth Games 2010; slum demolition; global aesthetics; global cities; reclaiming rivers

1. Introduction

The neoliberal economic turn of the 1980s in India brought about a paradigm shift in the monetary value of urban land. It changed the purposefulness of underdeveloped land expanses and pockets around and within metropolises. From the country's independence in 1947 until the 1980s, the land was conceptually valued for and associated with its natural properties as the Indian economy was characteristically agrarian. The era of globalization provided an immense impetus to the realty sector, primarily through public–private partnerships. The monetary value of land was increasingly calculated through its potential for developmental and infrastructural activities. Vacant, underused, or illegally occupied parcels of land, within and on the urban fringes, were rapidly moved out of their idle, non-lucrative state and made available for reworking. The Yamuna Pushta was a prominent example. It was one of the oldest and largest slums in Delhi until its demolition in 2004. Through the backdrop of economic globalization and the consequent changes in urban development policies, this study attempts to trace the notion of the *fragility of a home*, especially of the urban poor living in the slum of Yamuna Pushta, whose livelihood was predominantly dependent on the river's floodplains and other employment opportunities in proximity to their homes. It also outlines the economic, political, and environmental factors that catalyzed the demolition.

The prosperous capital city historically attracted and employed aspirants from a broad spectrum. The migrants settled in different locations in conjunction with their respective financial strengths. The least privileged lived either as destitute or in informal and illegal shanties called *jhuggi jhompris* in Hindi, Figure 1. Such clusters of shanties spread across specific parts of Delhi, offering accessibility to opportunities for informal labor or agriculture. These scattered slums were from time to time demolished by urban development

authorities, either under the pretext of being illegal structures or for undertaking infrastructural projects. The Pushta's case was different. It once perched on the bank of the river Yamuna, Delhi's natural heritage, once a pristine water body, which has become heavily polluted in its current state. Therefore, the Pushta held a locational significance, unlike other slums scattered over different urban regions of Delhi.

Figure 1. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (Source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

In 2003, when Delhi was declared host for the next Commonwealth Games 2010, the political agenda was to make the city and the river presentable. Urban development authorities defined a propagandist narrative around Delhi as a city of *national pride* and the Yamuna as *natural pride*. Various locations around the Yamuna were selected to construct structures for hosting the games and the international guests. Then, these selected spaces were either unused, underused, or occupied illegally and hence had to be cleared or prepared to ground the new urban vision, and the sacred Yamuna had to be *cleaned*. The Yamuna Pushta was located on the selected floodplain and fell under the river and its bank's redevelopment plan.

Hence, this study begins by stating the religious and sentimental factors within the Indian psyche around the river Yamuna, as various bodies employed these deep-rooted beliefs of the "sacred river" to frame the slogan of "reclaiming the Yamuna", attempting to justify the slum demolition. From the religious aspect, this study delineates—the modern, post-independence urban visions concerning the river as a crucial natural resource, continuing to state the environmental discourse around its mismanagement, resulting in its current polluted state. It traces the projection of rising incongruencies from the 1980s in the urban development patterns through emblems of "new urban visions" and the aspirations of an idyllic lifestyle of the new middle-class of the globalized nation against the dismissive habitation of the urban poor. It reads the notions contributing to the definition of a home within a slum, from its tangible, structural properties to its mental impressions on its residents and the other citizens. This section states the overlapping characteristics of the Pushta with the "zones of deterioration" or "bad lands", as proposed by Ernest Burgess in his model explaining stratifications and zones within cities and the redevelopmental agendas necessitating a transformation. Based on the linear events, from the implication of the Pushta residents as the polluters of the river, this paper reads the *politics of exclusion* of these monetarily underprivileged (non-)citizens, culminating in mass evictions. Though evictions occurred recurrently in Delhi, the Yamuna Pushta evictions were the largest witnessed in the early years of the millennia, undertaken by court orders and not by state-implemented policies (Bhan 2009, pp. 127–42).[1]

The latter sections present the story from the perspective of the artist/activist Ravi Agarwal. It aims to state the importance of artistic research, representing the Pushta residents and addressing the Yamuna's environmental neglect. The photographic works of Ravi Agarwal, in tune with the mentioned perspective, state the *dual marginalization*

—of the people and the river itself, comparable as documents essentially invalidating the allegation against the slum residents. The study of Agarwal's engagement and commitment to the environmental and social cause of the river and its people of *longue durée* navigates his concerns to a thoughtful and well-mapped discourse, subverting topical reportage. This study, therefore, reads his selected works and aims to stress a trinodal approach, connecting the people and their homes, the river, and the floodplains. Agarwal is the founder and director of the environmental NGO Toxics Link and the founder of The Shyama Foundation. These organizations support art and ecology practices in India. His artistic practice and activistic efforts contribute osmotically, conceptualizing publications and projects similarly. Most projects adopt an inclusive, multidisciplinary approach, involving artists, environmentalists, social scientists, activists, policymakers, students, etc., while focusing on ecological crises and public engagement. The *Anthropocene India* initiative began in 2018, analyzing notions of power and ethics and ways of perceiving the planet's present and future (Agarwal et al. n.d.). *Samtal Jameer*, *Samtal Jameen* (Equal Terrains, Equal Selves) radically re-thinks human and non-human relationships, contemplating ideas of justice, sustainability, and democracy in a multispecies world (Agarwal n.d.). Some of his recent publications and editorial projects include an essay, *Landfills—Non-place of the Anthropocene*, 2022, in Climates, Habitats, Environments, edited by Ute Meta Bauer, *Alien Waters, 2021*, in The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change, edited By T. J. Demos, Emily Eliza Scott, and Subhankar Banerjee, and *The Crisis of Climate Change: Weather Report*, 2021, edited along with Omita Goyal.

One of Agarwal's projects co-curated with Nina Kalenbach and Till Krause (Hamburg) was the Yamuna-Elbe Public Art and Outreach project, which was held in Hamburg (October 2011) and Delhi (November 2011). It was initiated and funded by the Hamburg Department of Culture in cooperation with Germany and India in 2011/2012. Individual and comparative approaches simultaneously addressed issues of *sustainable urban development* and *environmental technology in the cities* of the Yamuna in Delhi and the Elbe in Hamburg. This project asserts the gravity of Agarwal's work concerning the Yamuna and the people around it. The primary interest outlined for the project was to find ways to manage the Elbe and Yamuna in their current state and the underlying problems. The approach undertaken by the curators for the Yamuna/Delhi part of the project is relevant to the present study of insistingly including the common people and those marginalized in Yamuna's developmental discourse. A remarkable achievement of the project was creating a space for democratic participation between —artists, scientists, environmental activists, common people, farmers, urban planners, and policymakers from the Delhi Development Authority (DDA).

Further, the artworks created during the project were made accessible through special provisions for all citizens, even as they were placed on the otherwise inaccessible riverbank. The *Yamuna Manifesto* was published; it was a bilingual document, written in Hindi and English, to ensure the accessibility of the material to people of diverse backgrounds. It provided a historical and religious background of the river, its transformations through human interventions, mismanagement, spaces of residence and occupations linked to it, pollution, ecological imbalances, possible impacts of the new urban imaginations, the ecology– economy equation, the artistic research, and artworks of the project, finally questioning the future of the Yamuna. This project's "public–private participation" equation displayed a democratic distinctiveness contrary to the imbalanced neoliberal economic form. Even though the project did not present definitive solutions, it affirmatively opened a space and scope for dialogue between otherwise polarized bodies. It offered various vantages to address the issue of the Yamuna, most importantly about reading about the river and the people around it in a more human and integrated way than from a purely technological and economically progressive perspective.

2. Analogous Art Projects

Since this study focuses on Ravi Agarwal's works, it is imperative to justify the same with respect to the scope of the inquiry. Various contemporary Indian artists have addressed issues related to the environment, the river Yamuna, and the changing development patterns and physical residential structures within the context of economic globalization. Correspondingly, the works of Atul Bhalla, Vibha Galhotra, Gigi Scaria, and Asim Waqif are focused on. Most of them have been generational residents or relatively recent migrants to Delhi. Hence, their artworks translate their lived experiences into their respective creative practices. The inquiries range from historical research of the ecological or hydrological systems of the ancient capital to those addressing the changes, losses, or ambiguities from the 1980s. These artists have exhibited widely, and their works hold significance in the dialogue of sustainable urban development and environmental aesthetics. Hence, it is essential to mention these works in the current study. The only reason for not including their works as the primary visual references in this study is that they do not directly address the issue of the Yamuna Pushta demolition and the notion of the fragility of homes, or the works are executed in non-photographic media.

Atul Bhalla, through photo performances in the series titled *Looking for Dvaipayana*, 2014, questions the loss of the hydrological network of the Yamuna. Bhalla attempts to connect to the lost water bodies of Delhi. Urban infrastructural development projects connected Delhi's peripheries and satellite towns; concrete structures sprawled in tandem. In the process, the networks of groundwater resources were either partially damaged or entirely lost. The artist, through his works, looks for what is lost. Bhalla has mapped such disappearances of water sources in different parts of the world, further mapping the lack of empathy towards water as a normalized and accepted aspect of human behavior. The method of inquiry and visual questioning of the lost element translate the sheer materiality of the resource to its preciousness.

Humans in Bhalla's works are entities to be implicated. Vibha Galhotra, conversely, explores the unquestioned acceptance and everydayness of ecological damage by citizens through her photographs, installations, and photo performances. Primarily referenced in and around Delhi, a city that has gained notoriety for its pollution levels, the artist documents the near naturalization of accessories like face masks and domestic air and water purifiers as consumerist solutions to the manmade problem. *Breath by Breath*, 2016–2017, and *Negotiated Necessities*, 2008, portray a healthy environment as a memory and the methods of consumerists convincing of remedial objects. Gigi Scaria uses "concrete emblems of progress" through the new skyline in the urban development dialogue. Aspirational structures and other infrastructural emblems form a part of his critique against a divisive approach toward citizens. It also needs to be noted that Scaria provides a pertinent yet general view of the divisive situation.
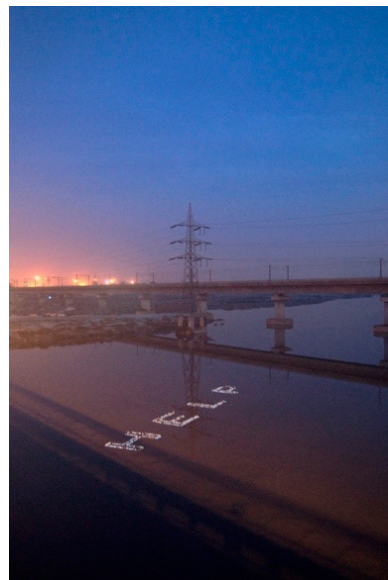
Contextually comparable to the inquiry of this study is a work by the artist Asim Waqif titled *HELP, Jamuna Protest*, 2010–2011, Figures 2–4. The work consisted of an installation and a video. The installation was fabricated with plastic bottles, metal frames, and LED lights, which spelled out the word *HELP*. It was left to float on the river, visible from over a bridge, from just a small section before the visual barricades. These barricades were erected before the Commonwealth Games 2010, hosted in Delhi, to bar the view of the blackened Yamuna to the passersby. As the title suggests, the work addressed two aspects—one of the polluted and helpless Yamuna and the other of the river protesting.

Along with the installation, the artist made a video of his conversation with a ragpicker living on the bank of the Yamuna. The video provides a comprehensive picture, especially of the men who undertake unhygienic and menial tasks for a living. The man in the frame narrates the story of his life and his relation to the river. A sense of disillusionment and skepticism towards the government in managing urban poverty and caring for the Yamuna form the core of the narration. At the same time, the polluted river still plays the role of a mother and a home to the man. Interestingly, his insistence on the false implication of the poor for polluting it is like the narrations of the previous residents of the Yamuna Pushta.

However, Waqif's video does not discuss the demolition of the slums. Hence, this study uses the work as a document of the unchanged state of the river.

The artists discussed have either worked around urban development problems in Delhi, environmental issues in general and concerning the Yamuna, or the people living around it. The Yamuna's bank as an extended space, as a home, does not fall under their scope. Hence, the current study singularly focuses on Ravi Agarwal's works as fitting within the purview of the Yamuna Pushta and the shanty homes, their demolition, and the resident people through photographic works. An inseparable aspect of the demolition of the Pushta was its relation to the river Yamuna. The river has been generationally accepted as a sacred entity based on historical references and ancient Hindu mythology. In a way, this granted a sentimental aspect, catalyzing the need to demolish the slum. Hence, before discussing the issue of the slum demolition, the reason for selecting the Yamuna Pushta as a target needs to be explained. The following two sections build a context that explains the same, beginning with the sacredness of the river, the location, the latter of their mismanagement, and finally, the demolition story.

Figure 2. Asim Waqif, *HELP, Jamuna Protest*, 2010–2011 (source: © 2010–2011, Asim Waqif).
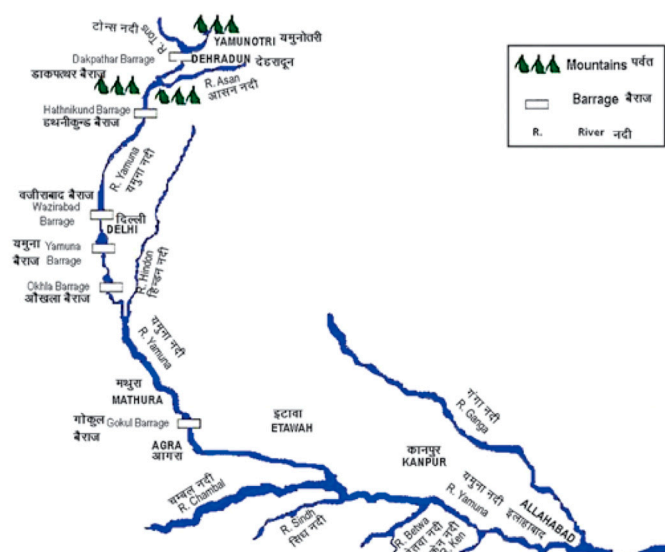

Figure 3. Asim Waqif, *HELP, Jamuna Protest*, 2010–2011 (stills from the video) (source: © 2010–2011, Asim Waqif).

Figure 4. Asim Waqif, *HELP, Jamuna Protest*, 2010–2011 (stills from the video) (source: © 2010–2011, Asim Waqif).

3. River Yamuna a Sacred Scape: Historical and Mythological Associations

The significance of the river Yamuna must be understood from two aspects. One is its actuality as a geo-terrain, and the second is the people's mental terrain. The geo-terrain describes its physicality as is, in its current state, and its correlation to the political identity of Delhi as a preferred capital. The second is a more elusive type, tracing its presence within the mythological, religious, and emotional realm of human imagination. The Yamuna or Jamuna originates from the Saptarishi Kund (the pond of seven sages) in the Champasar glacier in the Kalind range of the Himalayas, upstream of Yamunotri, in Uttarakhand, India. The rivers Tons, Giri, and Bata (meeting the river on its right bank) and Asan (meeting on its left bank) are the key tributaries that constitute the formative basin of the river in the Himalayan states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, Figure 5. It carves its way through the scenic hills before it enters the plains. This densely populated river basin spreads from Panipat, Sonepat, Delhi, Faridabad, Ghaziabad, Mathura, and Agra before it finally merges with the river Ganga at Allahabad (now Prayagraj).

Figure 5. River Yamuna map. Published in the Yamuna Manifesto, 2013 (Image courtesy of Ravi Agarwal).

Most of the villages and important sites by its bank have their names correlated to some religious or mythological relevance to the river. Various Vedic and theological references provide evidence of the purity and power of the Yamuna, also addressed as river Kalindi. According to Hindu mythology, Yamuna is the daughter of the sun god Surya and his wife Sanjana and is the twin sister of Yama, the lord of death. Vedic references state her to be a sacred river and a goddess, and a sip of her water, or a dip in it, erases the fear of Yama and death. Even today, many Hindus prefer their final rites to be performed in the crematoriums on the bank of the Yamuna as an assurance of salvation. This is proven, as one of the oldest and largest Hindu crematoriums in Delhi, named the Nigambodh Ghat on the Yamuna bank, is still functional. In Mahabharata, the river's association with Lord Krishna from his birth to various Krishna *leelas*[2] in the Braj region through which the river flows further underscores her significance. The Vaishnava philosophy states a moral transformation while experiencing oneness with the river. The hymns in *Yamunastakam*, written by a 16th-century saint, Vallabhacharya, state, "*Through you all spiritual powers are attained and Krishna is delighted. You completely transform the nature of your devotees*" (Haberman 2006, p. 107). The text provides an aesthetic view of the river and its spiritual and natural mightiness in conjunction with the flora and fauna around it. Given her bounty, the Yamuna is considered a mother by those whose survival depends on her.

From Vedic and Puranic texts and Bhakti literature, there is a vast repository of literature, ritual practices, textual matter, and popular traditions on the river. The river is mentioned as an aqueous mass or a personified goddess in various visual traditions. Within the Hindu temple architecture, the personified river is sculpturally rendered on the doorjambs, usually paired with the river Ganga. Iconographically, Yamuna is depicted as a young maiden, standing atop a tortoise, her vehicle, holding a water pot in her hand. The presence of the two rivers signifies the blessings of fertility and abundance. Even today, some people take a dip in the river every morning to gain religious merit and blessings and pray for salvation for their ancestors, overlooking its frothing water and the level of pollution, Figure 6. Some people do the same on specific auspicious days, attesting to her purifying properties and revered status.

Figure 6. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (Source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

Geographically, the tectonic events in the Himalayan region resulted in the elevation of the right or the western bank of the Yamuna, forming floodplains on the eastern bank. Hence, ancient cities like Agra, Mathura, and Delhi flourished on the river's west bank (Agarwal and Krause 2011, pp. 18–22). The natural plenteousness of her fertile plains has

supported agrarian activities from early settlements. The river has been fundamental in sustaining varied life forms while passing through multiple agro-climatic and agroecological zones in different states. The river's course historically determined the lines of mobility and trade.

In addition to being an aqueous lifeline of these cities, the river also provided an aesthetic backdrop to various riparian structures dotting its banks. Structures like the marble mausoleum Taj Mahal at Agra and the Red Fort in Delhi (the two UNESCO heritage sites) are aesthetically aggrandized by the Yamuna's physical magnificence. The river's subterranean networks and hydrological cycle also contributed to the hydro-architectural innovation of civic significance and aesthetic engagement. The river's hydrological cycle is such that it most often swells and floods during the monsoons, from June to September, and recharges its deep underground water networks, spreading far away from its prime course. It nearly dries up in the plains in the post- to pre-monsoon period. Built forms tapping underground water, like *baolis* or step wells, *hauz* or reservoirs, *serais* or caravanserais, and *piaus* or small water tanks, were constructed by rulers as centers for free water distribution. These spaces would be recharged during the monsoon season and provide reserved water to the people throughout the year. These collated the aqueous necessities of humans, religious and social morality of serving free water, architectural innovation, and regnal generosity. These structures provide a glimpse of a modest way of harvesting rainwater and the necessity of storing the Yamuna's water for yearlong consumption in a non-intrusive way. Historically, the water of the river was channelized for irrigation. Since the current focus is on the Yamuna in conjunction with Delhi, it is essential to establish that relationship with the political powers.[3] Most of these ruling dynasties had their capital in and around the now politically demarcated city of Delhi. Each constructed artificial reservoirs and gardens by the Yamuna within this territory. Large-scale attempts were made in the 14th century by the Tughlaqs, in the 17th century by the Mughals, and in the 18th century by the Britishers. Barrages were constructed over the Yamuna to hold its water for local use, reducing its strength downstream. However, till the colonial rule, the river was navigable. Later, similar attempts were made in the post-independence period, aided by modern technology.

4. Embodying Modernity in Post-Independence India

The vision of the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was to bring about "growth through scientific temperament and technological progress" with a social cause for the new nation. The state-controlled policies and planning aimed at utilizing available human and material resources to reduce income and opportunity disparities (Jagannarayanan 1967, pp. 34–48). Nehru's famed words stating "dams as the temples of the new age" encapsulated the material form of his vision (Temples of the New Age 1958, pp. 1–4). Subsequently, the government planned hydropower projects for many rivers. The PM laid the foundation stone for the Yamuna Valley Hydroelectric Project Stage-I at Dakpathra on 23 December 1949 (Hydropower Projects n.d.). The decades following it witnessed sequential projects that either diverted or utilized the river's resources. The developmental plans incorporated agricultural, industrial, social, and economic aspects—within a single framework (Jagannarayanan 1967, p. 37). Consequently, industries of varying sizes and functions were established on the banks of the river.

The current study looks at the transformations of the Yamuna bank within Delhi. This strip was lined with fields and villages, industries, residential spaces of workers and laborers, and other rising emblems of industrial development. The reforms mentioned above did bring about an estimated growth during the immediate few decades before they outgrew a timeframe and scope. The lack of reassessment of the earlier established model overlooking the increased population density and industrial activity by the river, along with the drastic reforms in national economic policies of the mid-1980s, resulted in the mismanagement of the precious resource.

In the mid-1980s, the government adopted policies of liberalization, economic deregulation, and privatization (the following section shall discuss it in detail). Recognizing

the need for healthy domestic competition, the Indian government encouraged participation from private players in the industrial sector. Diluting the stringency of the licensing processes was presumed to facilitate the same.[4] But the policy backfired as it led to the indiscriminate increase in industrial units, especially along the Yamuna. This resulted in a greater drawing of the freshwater, disturbing its surface and underground water networks.

In its existing condition, the Yamuna enters Delhi near the Wazirabad Barrage, where most of its potable water is drawn out for domestic and industrial use, reducing its strength to a negligible fraction of its original volume. It flows approximately 42 km through Delhi until it reaches the Okhla Barrage. Within Delhi, licensed and unlicensed industries of varying sizes line the floodplains. These include oil refineries, thermal power plants, distilleries, pulp, pharmaceutical, chemical, electroplating, weaving, sugar, et cetera, lined over the bank, which release treated and mostly untreated effluents in the river (P. Joshi et al. 2022).[5] Nearly 3000 million liters of municipal and industrial sewage are dumped into it (Sood 2009, pp. 2–3), and the people living on its bank in slums contribute less than 0.08 percent of the entire waste (Agarwal 2005, pp. 126–27). With the lack of adequate waste management facilities, most effluents from industries and human waste are drained directly and untreated into the river. Over the years, with the reduced freshwater strength post-extraction at Wazirabad Barrage and with the release of waste, the river has consequently lost its aqueous essence. It has turned into a dark sewage flow, with floating garbage and a stream of froth, resulting in the loss of freshwater and the biodiversity that once thrived. The problem has magnified over time, resulting in a nearly irreversible crisis of a depleting resource and the ruination of natural heritage in the heart of the national capital.

The Yamuna is supposed to be sacred, pure, and clean, but in its current state, it is blackened. The river is nearly dead, and the land around it is no longer a poetically pleasant space to visit but is an expanse of visual and olfactory inconvenience. It has been rendered inaccessible by various civic bodies to avoid additional pollution caused by visiting citizens.[6] Apropos, the political egos, relegating the natural heritage as "dead" or sullied seems nearly unacceptable. The Yamuna's revival, restoration of purity, and integration of Delhi's glory have been part of the political agenda for various developmental projects in the capital. A bilateral project of the Indian and Japanese governments titled the Yamuna Action Plan was introduced in 1993 to restore the river.[7] It did bring about a few positive outcomes, but the river was far from being restored. The economic reforms of the 1980s elicited a different purposefulness of the river land, apart from the established agrarian and industrial, based on its natural resources, to heavily monetized infrastructural possibilities. The following section shall elucidate the economic, political, and developmental factors and the subsequent initiatives undertaken.

5. Neoliberal Economy: New Urban Visions and "Bad Lands"

A corollary to the mentioned neoliberal status of the economy and the subsequent globalization was India's new identity as an emerging financial market and an outsourcing hub at a global level (Dickens 2001, pp. 2–4). India's intellectual capital was gaining international strength. The global integration of financial markets, technological processes, and metropolises, as nodes within the circuitry, brought about an urgency to build "world-class" cities, characterizing a global cadre. These terminologies had no specific definition or stated measure. They spelled differently for different countries (McClellan et al. 2018, pp. 8–15; Pelton and Singh 2019, pp. 18–22), yet found nauseating currency in various urban development proposals. The national and state governments enthusiastically advocated the vision. Dedicated Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were designed to house such businesses, reflecting the aspirations of their participants (Statement, Smart City Mission and Guidelines 2015). These spaces were characterized by urban agglomeration and hyper-concentration of the high-intellectual capital (Sassen 2006). The increased presence of multi- and transnational businesses in the country provided high pay packages to skilled labor like never before, thereby creating a new economically significant class of young, educated, and skilled laborers possessing higher disposable incomes and aspirations for a

better lifestyle. Consequently, curated residential spaces were designed to cater to the novel lifestyle. Through privatization, civic land was being managed increasingly by private participants rather than the government, thereby displaying a jarringly different manner and pattern of developmental projects.

The urban planning projects were loaded with new keywords like smart cities[8] and techno-polis and superlative prefixes like mega, super, and hyper, denoting the size, strength, and speed of "updation" of the city and its emblematic infrastructural projects. Delhi was to grow as a pioneering Smart City. It had to internalize the technocapitalist character of the new economy. It constantly competed with Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, and other cities to attain infrastructure modeled around Shanghai and Singapore (Tripathi 2007, pp. 45–49). These cities had transformed their infrastructure within a decade. Each metropolis and its satellites aspired to achieve an Alpha, Beta, or Gamma status based on the Globalization and World Cities Study Group and Network (GaWC) classification (Chacko 2007, pp. 131–40). An array of projects was planned and implemented. Mumbai declared the construction of fifty flyovers in 1997, followed by metro and mono-rails, flyovers, and the (ongoing) disputed coastal-way project.[9] Bangalore was transformed from a famous "Garden City" into an "IT City". Templatized SEZs and residential spaces were constructed within the city and its peri-urban fringe. Many sites destroyed underground water resources through landfills and construction encroachments (Nagendra and Ostrom 2014). The imbalanced dependence on existing natural resources caused their depletion to lower limits, especially for water. Further, dumping sewage and domestic waste in inland water bodies, particularly lakes, has resulted in increased water pollution, rendering them hazardous.

A similar and simultaneous pattern of urban expansion could be traced in Delhi, grounded on the monetary incentivization of land. Gentrification gained traction towards spaces that contradicted the new global idiom and needed transformation. Methods were devised to refurbish such pockets. The government formulated a Smart City Mission to attain the same. It consisted of the following strategies: *retrofitting*, *redevelopment*, and *greenfield development* (or city expansion), plus a pan-city initiative to identify and implement area-based solutions (Statement, Smart City Mission and Guidelines 2015, p. 8). Thereby, spaces within the cities had to be categorized for executing a specific strategy or a combination of these strategies. The primary part of the process was identifying and classifying zones/regions. Like the model by Ernest Burgess, stratification explains a city's expansion process through a series of concentric circles, determining zones of urban expansion and different types/characters.[10] The center or core consists of the central business district—the "loop" radiating outwards would be a zone of deterioration, a zone of workingmen's homes, a residential area, and a commuters' zone. Even as Burgess acknowledged the impossibility of an exact overlap of the model with different city structures, the work is significant in understanding larger constructs of human ecology, focusing on interactions between individuals of different social groups (McKenzie 1924, pp. 287–95). Therefore, it is relevant to the current study. This study states that the Yamuna Pushta conforms to the definition of the "zones of deterioration" or "bad lands"; therefore, it shall focus on its characteristics during the later arguments. Typically, these are the least desirable zones for inhabitation, accommodating the homeless, migratory population, workers, and laborers, all living in makeshift shanties or semi-permanent homes, characteristically decrepit and degraded spaces, blemishes within the cityscape. The Indian government sought to transform this impoverished, dense, polluted area into a "green land". Various causes fed a specific area-based solution for the Yamuna Pushta.

6. Disagreeable Homes and the Politics of Exclusion

In the 1990s, as mentioned earlier, a migratory trend was characterized by the influx and the growth of wealthy, highly educated, intellectual capital–global participants, visibly widening the income disparity.[11] Manifestly, from a new taste in public and private architecture, the migrants and poor residents and their homes were increasingly being

despised and, worse so, considered a threat and uncharacteristic within the vision of a clean and ideal city. So much so that, from the year 2000, several Public Interest Litigations (PILs) were filed by the urban non-poor residents' welfare and trade associations against squatters in the capital. According to Gautam Bhan, evictions were not new to Delhi. Still, the post-millennial evictions were different, with the involvement of the courts rather than the state, the assertion of the altered definitions of "public interest", and the silence of the state and central government (Bhan 2009, p. 128). The Pushta dwellers were earlier implicated as polluters of the river and, in the post-2000s, were further criminalized as a threat and visual misfits by a section of non-poor citizens.

Alongside the discourse on citizens' well-being and security, an "event-driven cause" catalyzed the effort to create a smart capital. In November 2003, Delhi was declared host for the Commonwealth Games 2010 (CWG). It would be the first major multi-sporting event hosted in Delhi after the 1982 Asian Games. The 1982 Asian Games were significant as they were the first international event India hosted after its independence. They narrated India's story of rebuilding its strength after the wealth was drained by colonial rule. The CWG 2010 aimed to project a steady position for the country in the globalized world.

The rationale behind hosting the CWG was divided into *tangible* and *intangible* categories. The prior refers to the infrastructural impetus and internal development. The latter intangible impact consisted of international recognition, stimulating economic interest, and political esteem, eventually cascading into the country's future economic strength (Uppal 2009, pp. 8–9). The projected results necessitated the aestheticization of the capital, an immediate "change of use" of the land or space on which the CWG events were planned. Any problems pertaining to these spaces had to be immediately resolved, aligned to the aims of the spectacle rather than addressing its primary root concern, seemingly validating Lefebvre's "contradiction" brought about by the extension of capitalism to space, leveraging representation by diverting or evading the fundamental problems of the space (Lefebvre 1991, p. 326). In the current case, since the event reverberated national pride, the city had to embody it. Posters and hoardings aimed to attain "clean and green" Delhi were visible everywhere. Leveled roads, mono- and metro rails, flyovers, and other symbols of superior infrastructure had to be ready for the spectacle. Spaces of residence and recreation, indoor and outdoor stadiums, hospitals, and subsidiary structures had to be constructed for the international participants—the guests.

The 1982 games were held in South Delhi, then an already established and occupied location. Since then, the city developed densely in various other parts. Alongside the Yamuna riverfront, East Delhi was one largely neglected open space inhabited by slum dwellers with small, cultivated patches. Hence, it provided an easy scope for development. The Delhi Developmental Authority (DDA) acquired the land from the Uttar Pradesh state government. Delhi's natural heritage and pride, the Yamuna, had to be "cleaned" and redeveloped, with the vision based on the London Thames model. It had to be cleaned, if not of the dirt in it, at least of the people (Amita Baviskar 2006, pp. 88–95). Actions against the actual polluters of the river and the industries were negligible. The Yamuna Pushta was one of the spaces identified early on—a blemish to be cleared. It would be converted into a greenfield, embellished with parks and walkways by the river.

The existing "illegal" structures of the slums had to be cleared to prepare the place for development. Only a fraction of the residents had the necessary legal documents, qualifying them for relocation; the others could be expropriated and *uprooted*.[12] The Delhi High Court in 2003 ordered the demolition of the Yamuna Pushta. However, it received opposition from environmentalists and various non-governmental bodies, protesting the land as "unfit" for construction and highly polluted. Being a low-lying riverbed with alluvial soil and the city's largest groundwater recharge zone, it was ecologically fragile and prone to severe damage caused by extensive construction (Uppal 2009, pp. 19–22). The Yamuna would soar in the monsoons and could breach its embankments. Any large-scale construction on such a space was prone to flooding. The government used the same argument and stated that the situation was hazardous for the slum too to be located on the

floodplain. A counterargument exposed other public and private structures—Akshardham Temple, Sainik Farms, and the Delhi Secretariate—on the same floodplain and demanded their demolition, too.[13] They were hypocritically declared as organized structures and hence categorized differently from the slums, and no legal action was taken against them. A stay on the demolition of the Pushta was appealed on humanitarian grounds. One of the primary demands was for the eviction to be held until the completion of the academic year of the schools, considering the large number of school-going children living in the slum. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) presented an elaborate plan for resettlement, and the order was reinstated. The counterappeal by the slum residents was ignored, as MCD assured fair terms of resettlement.

By the judicial orders, the Yamuna Pushta was demolished, Figure 7. Bulldozers, armed police, and crew worked long hours and demolished every home and other structure between March and April 2004. The police ensured the smooth implementation of the court order. Any individual impeding, opposing, or even capable of obstructing the demolition was arrested while acting or preventatively. Amongst the action, some residents, even children, sat, collecting their belongings, resigned to their (ill-)fate (Agarwal 2006). The land was finally cleared, ready to be converted into a green patch—a riverside promenade, a major future tourist attraction. More than 150,000 people of the Pushta were displaced. Fewer than 25 percent received alternate resettlement. The location for resettlement was nearly 20–30 km away from the Yamuna Pushta, implying a phenomenal increase in the cost of travel to the then-existing place of employment or a loss of the same. Many who were not resettled were back on the streets or were absorbed in some slum elsewhere or returned to their villages, fearing another displacement.

Figure 7. Ravi Agarwal, Yamuna Pushta Demolition, from *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

In the following years, expressways, flyovers, metro lines, manmade embankments lining and running over the river, and the Commonwealth Village were constructed close to or on the same sensitive floodplains. The sole justifying aim was the positive image of these new icons to Delhi as a world-class city (Follmann 2016, pp. 169–94). Some violate the developmental guidelines prohibiting construction on the floodplains. Some residential and commercial projects received clearances without stringent inquiries. Projects like the Delhi Metro were considered as "overdue modernization" for the city's infrastructure (Uppal 2009; Dupont 2011). The Golden Jubilee Park replaced the slum. The same will be

discussed in the following sections. Conservation of the "biodiversity" set the foundation for the proposed park. The discriminatory approach underscored the urban politics of delegitimizing the urban poor. Bad governance was responsible for their very state—as their numbers were underestimated and needs ignored. To note, the non-action against the illegal structures of the urban non-poor and criminalization of the illegal inhabitation of urban space for livelihood was a judicial stand. Hence, the demolition of the homes in the Yamuna Pushta is not just a candid case of the erasure of an illegal space. The Pushta consisted of homes, hence deserved sensitive handling. It confirmed a subjective and insensitive treatment of a section of the urban populace. This was further underscored by a very grave issue of the judicial *legitimization* of a prejudiced perception of the state machinery and the non-poor urban citizens towards the poor and their homes within the new urban visions. Hence, could one deduce that a home's value and legal status solely depend on "whose home it is". It has been established that "where it stood" was a matter of mere convenience and subjectivity.

7. Non-Citizens and the Fragile Non-Homes

The previous section elaborated on causal factors and decisions leading to the demolition of the Pushta. The current section intends to explain the notion of the *fragility of homes of the urban poor* from the point of view of its residents. Since the Pushta was a microcosm of activities, professions, and support systems and an interstice in the larger environmental narrative around the Yamuna, this section interlaces multiple perspectives from which the *site* and its *people* could be defined. Simultaneously, it underlines the denial of accommodating the alterity of underprivileged life and livelihood while myopically painting the homogenous image of national wealth and prosperity.

The Pushta residents argued against the demolition, stating that the slum was not a *sudden*, unanticipated settlement. It had existed and grown organically over decades. There is no official record of when the slum came into existence, though passing references state that farmers and some workers occupied the land. Some refugees who fled from West Punjab and settled in Delhi established a non-farming settlement on the Pushta. The slum expanded in the 1960s, and during the 1982 Asian Games, the government welcomed cheap, informal labor to complete the mass infrastructural projects without proper housing facilities. Hence, they were absorbed into various informal settlements in the capital, implying two things. Firstly, many resident families settled in the space out of compulsion and not out of choice, some as refugees fleeing threats or as those seeking employment for a better livelihood. Secondly, many families lived there for nearly a quarter of the century before the slum's demolition, long enough to have invested in upgrades and converted the structure as a home—an aggregable abode. The government had overlooked their presence for an extended period, implicitly allowing the slum to grow. Hence, the people had a right to life and livelihood in the capital (Lefebvre 1996). A sudden eviction meant the people were paying a high price for the government's decades of inaction. The residents had long hoped that the sheer number of people entitled to resettlement would deter the demolition project or they would receive legal status as the Akshardham temple received ex post facto. Evidently, the case of the Pushta linked the place, the people, their home, and the larger political scenario. Hence, the current section addresses these grounds from multiple perspectives.

Etymologically, Yamuna Pushta meant a bank of the holy river Yamuna, seeming a nearly sacred space to live on: fertile land nourishing cultivation and its water networks. Many locals still address the river as *Maa* or mother, a nurturing entity. To them, her water was a blessing and not a polluted necessity, unlike the conceptions of the other citizens. To the *government* authorities and *judiciary*, the Pushta was illegally occupied land with self-constructed disorganized structures raised without the permission of the landowning agencies.[14] To the Pushta residents, it was a matter of compulsion. *Locationally*, the Yamuna Pushta was a small two-to-three-kilometer patch on the embankment. Though highly congested, it was preferred as it provided low-cost housing within oth-

erwise unaffordable Delhi. Many residents narrated stories of filling and strengthening the soft land of the embankment in the formative stages of the slum as a foundation for the shanties. *Demographically*, it was filled with migrants—individuals and families from various states, casts and religions, and financial backgrounds, possessing varied skill sets, speaking different languages, all hoping for a decent source of living or at least a means of sustenance. This description sounds like a normal picture of a plural social structure. *Professionally*, it comprised daily wage earners like laborers, technicians, domestic helpers, some un-landed farmers, construction workers, ragpickers, et cetera, hence falling low on the socioeconomic hierarchy, Figures 8 and 9. The discussion around livelihood options opens a more profound debate of *respect*. Many non-governmental organizations had started medical, education, and child-care centers. These efforts countered the lack of respect towards people experiencing poverty born out of the ignorance of bad governance.

Figure 8. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

Figure 9. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

Regarding *urban design and planning*, the slum grew illegally, indiscriminately, and calamitously dense for a fragile landmass. It was the largest slum in Delhi, in a prime location. It impeded the beautification projects planned around the Yamuna. *Architecturally*,

the Pushta consisted of densely packed shanty/slum squatters, called *jhuggi jhompris* in Hindi, defined as shanties and temporary makeshift spaces, except for a few houses, which were permanent brick and cement homes. Overall, it was a maze of walls and sheds, demarcating a seemingly fluid territory—a personal space. Each house was saturated with family members or "residents space sharing", who preferred a roofed space to sleep under and to keep their belongings in rather than the streets. To the residents, it was a safe abode, assuring a livelihood. The houses and shanties lacked basic amenities like water and sanitation, forcing them to defecate openly on the bank of the sacred Yamuna, hence an *environmental* threat. They were violating *civic decency* and *privacy* norms that homes offer or protect, thus extending their filth from their space of inhabitation to the city and its river.

To the residents, the Pushta had grown over the decades and became politically influential, spreading across two parliamentary districts. Despite the political interest, it barely received any basic amenities (Mehra and Batra 2016) or assurance, even in terms of its existence. The people collectively found ways and means of support and sustenance within the capital and the river, which remained crucial to their daily lives. The political promise of resettlement spelled no form of betterment but direct uprooting. For the few families who were provided "homes", these were far away from the space they called home and far from being called homes. The new areas, too, lacked provisions for potable water, electricity, sanitation, schools, and transportation, indicating a re-creation of another *bad land*, with another possibility of demolition in the future. As Delhi underwent a transformation for the "game spectacle", these people were pushed to a worse condition. The locations for resettlement were Bawana, Holambi Kalan, Narela, Madanpur Khadar, Molar Bund, Tikri Khurd, Holambi Khurd, and Rohini, which were, on average, 18–35 km away from the places of employment for most of the Pushta residents (Roy 2004).[15] There was very little that the people could have done to better their lives while living within minimal means. The poor people had been ignored, analogous to the river. They were bound to reemerge in a different place but in a similar or worsened form.

An elegy to the uprooting of the people and the obliteration of their homes is Agarwal's performance titled *Immersion.Emergence*, 2007, Figures 10 and 11. Agarwal appeared in a shroud by the bank of the Yamuna, enacting the Hindu funerary ritual, in which the shrouded corpse is cremated, and the deceased's ashes are immersed in the sacred river to attain salvation. To recall, one of the biggest, oldest, and still functional crematoriums, Nigambodh Ghat, is located on the bank of the sacred Yamuna. It is a place preferred by many Hindus to have their last rites performed. The aspect of death and beyond of the performance can be read differently. Nancy Adajania, a cultural historian and curator, suggests the performance "as an expression of the idea that "ecocide is suicide", that is, the murder of the ecology is suicide" (N. Adajania n.d.). The people or slum residents, the river, and the ecological dialogue stand interconnected yet independently as primary markers in the discussion. The aspect of ecocide, as focused on by Adajania, does hold pertinence, but one cannot overlook that the same was used as a tool against the people to devise the initial tool of saving the river and cleaning it, which was of evicting the squatters, addressed as "bourgeois environmentalism" by Amita Baviskar, from the perspective of the urban non-poor or middle class, focusing on popular environmental concepts and concerns over a knowledgeable foundation (Amita Baviskar 2003, pp. 89–98). Precisely as the ecological concern lost gravity, the focus moved towards the superficial beautification of space.

Given this context, the title *Immersion.Emergence* could be explained as two acts: First of immersion, the death/erasure of the people's homes. The remains of the tangible homes, when purged, resulted in a clean, pure space. The Hindu ritual suggests that the dead attain salvation. Ironically, in this case, neither the people nor the river attain a better condition to exist in. Second of emergence, as these people were bound to re-emerge in some other place in a similar or worse condition, moving them from the center of the visual arena to some periphery or another margin, out of the visual limits. The performance was documented in a set of 24 photographic images. The artist stands in one position instead of being prostrate as a dead body would be, with the sunlight as the only changing aspect of the visuals. The

dead body could be read as a metaphor for the poor who stood their ground as long as they could before the final blow. The act could also signify the death of the civil rights of the urban poor residing in an urban location for a living, like most of the other citizens, emerging into a legitimized perspective of divisionism. The performance and its images are significant to the current study as Agarwal's attempt to represent the people and the issue through his presence, literally embodying it. Agarwal, hence, moves from the aspect of legal protest (as an activist) towards his art and body as a form of protest. The self becomes a space/site of being targeted and of protest, and the performance translates into an artistic response to ecological and humanitarian emergencies (Demos 2013, pp. 151–61).

Figure 10. Ravi Agarwal, *Immersion.Emergence*, 2007 (from a set of 24 images, © Ravi Agarwal).

Figure 11. Ravi Agarwal, *Immersion.Emergence*, 2007 (from a set of 24 images, © Ravi Agarwal).

8. Building a Counternarrative

Ravi Agarwal's photographic works are documents of his engagement with the river and its people at multiple levels, contributing to the consequent perspective developed by the artist. Some works capture the picturesque riverscape, while some address and inform a cognitive and critical approach. Agarwal often describes the river and its bank as vast and bare: a meditative site for many to revisit for personal solace. He recounts meeting people who ignore its dark, polluted water and foul odor for its calm and stillness, contrasting the commotion of the city. He states that many Hindus living on its bank take a daily dip to gain religious merit and hope their ashes to be immersed in the Yamuna. To most of them, the river is *Maa Yamuna* or Mother Yamuna, and her bank is their home (Agarwal 2005, pp. 126–30), also seen in the video still from Asim Waqif's work. Within the context of the river's filth, the urban poor's habitation in its proximity seems acceptable, normal, or expected. However, when fitted within the iconic visions, the same relation inverts. This study looks at a particular series of works oscillating between micro- to macroscopic visions and perceptions, focusing on the people to whom the river is a means of sustenance and residence to those aspiring for new profitability equations. Simultaneously, it counters the ecological narrative projected as the primary incriminating factor against the slum dwellers. The photographs provide a holistic perspective, from individual stories to collective habitation. Hence, in conjunction with the place, people form the central part of his inquiry.

A series of photographs titled *Alien Waters* and *Have you seen the flowers on the river?* brings forth the relationship between the river and the people who respectfully draw livelihood from it, a reason to live near the river: a window into the plethora of activities undertaken by individuals to subsist, questioning if they could be implicated in the river's pollution. Agarwal focuses on these local activities to build a more pragmatic picture addressing the inescapable impact of global capitalism, capturing the inherent contradictions of globalization, manifested through the demographic polarization of the selective beneficiaries versus non-entities, participant versus prohibited citizens. The previous sections provide detailed references to these images. Hence, the current section shall focus on the aesthetic approach undertaken by the artist in addressing the ecological and humanitarian injustice and crisis.

On a positive note, the river is benevolent. It has a hydrological cycle of its own. It is not full throughout the year, but swells and floods in the monsoons feed its banks, mutinodal catchment areas, and floodplains, which dry out in the following months (Kumar et al. 2020, pp. 461–75). At this juncture, it is important to mention that the river's hydrological cycle would annually force displacement on many slum dwellers, a predictable temporary occurrence. The people would be prepared for such a minor inconvenience and gradually resettle in their homes after the water level receded. At the same, even though it was a known cycle, the government ignored it during the construction of the Commonwealth Village. In September 2010, the river flooded heavily, submerging significant portions of the Commonwealth Village and causing damage to the structures and national image. News channels were televising the same in a highly dramatized manner. The rise in numerous private news channels, post-liberalization, each competing for virality, constantly aired this news (Amita Baviskar 2011, pp. 50–51). The flooding highlighted the ignorance of planning authorities of a predictable natural cycle and the hollowness of the proposed preparation for the spectacle.

Contrarily, the artist captures the positive usage of the hydrological cycle by the people living on the Yamuna's banks. The floodplains turn fecund through the rich silt—the cultivated fertile riverbank yields beautiful flowers, fruits, and vegetables local to the region. Even as the water is highly contaminated with fecal material and heavy metals, the consumers remain oblivious or blind to these factual details. The polluted water contaminates the crop, and yet it is consumed by the citizens, converted into the city's waste, and drained back into the river (Sood 2009, pp. 2–3). Flowers, especially marigolds, grow in abundance. The riverbank is lined with vibrant hues, Figure 12. The

poor residents cultivate the bank, attuned to its natural plenteousness, forming a major source of employment for men and women. The marigolds find use in rituals, various auspicious occasions, and celebrations. Some are woven into garlands. Some are sorted by their shades and torn into petals, et cetera. Every stage of this process intensely depends on human labor, assuring many livelihoods, especially for women, Figure 13.[16] The flowers, their derivative products, and vegetables circulate throughout the city. As seen in Figure 8, the produce is transported through the river in boats or equivalent frugal innovations to help stay afloat.

Figure 12. Ravi Agarwal, *Have you seen the flowers on the river?* 2007–2010 (source: © 2007–2010, Ravi Agarwal).

Figure 13. Ravi Agarwal, *Have you seen the flowers on the river?* 2007–2010 (source: © 2007–2010, Ravi Agarwal).

The series, the images, and the title summarize the rapid departure from considering the river and its primary essence in relation to the city and the people. *Have you seen the flowers on the river?* speaks of the decreasing number of cultivated patches by the river. The banks were previously predominantly a productive agricultural space. The series nearly prophecies the extinctions of cultivators, farmers, and other professions directly dependent on the natural resources of the Yamuna. Ignoring these small cultivators is ironic in a country that boasted of its agricultural strength. The images capture designated

agricultural areas as cultivated fields, benefiting from the river's rich soil and water. The few remaining marigold fields are fleeting images of farmed beauty compared to the slums, an example of a positively productive and non-polluting use of the land. Despite this, these spaces had to be cleared, too. Displacement of the farmers to a barren, waterless outskirt meant stripping them of their (illegal) homes, land, and occupation. It would also spell the conversion of the land for agricultural purposes to non-agricultural development.

Like the farmers in the marigold fields who build their profession around the natural aspect of the river, ragpickers have built theirs in cleaning what is interfering with the same natural process. As seen in the image, they dangerously collect recyclable waste from the black waters, rowing cloud-like boats made from plastic bottles and containers, disposed of by the city into the river. The row is a long wooden stick. Such contraptions are seen parked by the bank lined by the shanties, Figure 1. The plastic waste is collected from the river and then sorted by shape, size, type, and various other parameters of recycling. Then, it is cleaned and tied up in a large plastic sheet and sold for a living, Figure 14. In the image are young boys who undertake the task. To some, this is a part-time task undertaken before or after school hours. The younger boys are preferred as they weigh less and effortlessly balance on the plastic clouds. Some boys unhesitatingly swim in the dirty water with ease to obtain valuable waste. Shrouded with floating plastic, these ragpickers clean the river in parts. The period following any religious or auspicious days is particularly beneficial, as people make offerings to the river. Plastic covers, lamps, oil cans and plates, packing material, and similar disposed objects and items assure a sizable collection, translating into a larger earning.

Figure 14. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

The sacred Yamuna in these photographs appears in her polluted reality, not as a majestic river. People appear neither deprecated nor edified but interwoven in their surroundings. All constitute a lower stratum of an economic pyramid. The two entities appear in conjunction rather than incongruent. When comparing these images of toil with that of the boat surrounded by foaming water, the legal implication of these people seems logically questionable. Industrial effluents surround the boat. The Pushta lacked industries capable of causing a visible level of pollution. It was a space that lacked a proper water supply system. Even domestic water waste was a luxury and could not have been summed up to cause the given pollution level in the river. These settlers ironically cleaned the floating solid waste disposed of by the entire city. Why would the slum residents dispose of plastic in the river if collecting it meant a source of income? Further, vast cultivated land spaces

map the definition of a greenfield. The eviction uprooted most of the cultivators to give rise to another manicured greenfield through a park and walkways, lacking any possibilities of rich soil usage through cultivation. Hence, the images assert a counternarrative to the legally established environmental discourse against the Pushta residents.

The notion of respect and the lack thereof towards the urban poor formed a primacy of social injustice. Legal documents, reports, discussions, et cetera, repeatedly highlighted the "informal" aspect of the slum dwellers' work and residence, implying the "problem's size and gravity". It is a known fact that the predominance of unorganized and informal employment characterizes India's labor market (Srija and Shirke 2014, pp. 40–42). The images capture the people and places that are otherwise ignored, even as they form a large part of the unorganized sector. Farmers, vegetable vendors, cobblers, handymen, domestic helpers, ragpickers, et cetera, form a part of the visual repertoire, suggesting the microeconomies centered around the river and/or those housed around it. These photographic works bring forth realistic contemplative spaces. In India, given the size of the unregulated labor market, their presence on the streets while attempting to seek work is not unusual. They provide an inexpensive labor option for the economically better-off people, forming an important part of the urban machinery. Their residences within the urban area reflect the same. The ubiquity of the urban poor in India can be best exemplified through Dharavi, one of the largest slums in Asia. Dharavi is in the heart of Mumbai. Like the Pushta, it too is pried by the builders' lobby. The same has not yet been possible even as Mumbai strives to become another mega-global city. In Delhi, the government has not found ways to reverse and assimilate unregulated labor towards formalization while benefiting from it, further targeting their work and informal residences, whenever necessary, to conceal the fallacies and shortcomings of formal policies.

The images represent realities that do not resonate with any possibility of a disturbance or interference with the "global progress" occurring close to the banks within the metropolis. These people existed before and during the phase of economic liberalization. Yet, they became components within the larger narrative of erasure through the Pushta's eviction orders. Thought as imminent for long, the verdict was passed and rapidly implemented. The nature of this makes Pushta's case unusual. Visually, practically, and ideologically, questions of *encroachment* and *reclaiming* arise. The environmental narrative demanded that the natural scape and resources and its pervious fields be protected from the possibility of impervious roads and residences taking over (Bukharin 2009, pp. 12–13) or encroaching on its natural boundaries. As witnessed, the political narrative driven by capitalist intentions targeted the houses and residents of the Yamuna Pushta as the encroachers and reclaimed the space to protect the resource, simultaneously encroaching on the same floodplains through a "legally approved" structure, mentioned earlier.

9. River "Cleaned"

Independently, the photographs narrate micro-collective stories. The presence of people in the visuals holds a symbolic gravity as if reversing or resisting their exclusion from the larger narratives of development, an intentional marginalization. Their presence asserts their existence; however, disregarded. The event's sudden and calamitous character is evident when juxtaposing the images of the people engaged in working, reflecting good labor, to the Yamuna Pushta's demolished site, Figure 7. The normalcy of the everyday tasks and routine is substituted by the image of eerie rubbles of their abode, metaphorizing power. Many of the residents were at work when the demolition began. Agarwal mentions the sense of disbelief while capturing the image of the demolition of the Yamuna Pushta (Agarwal 2006, pp. 14–20). It was an imperative purgatory action sanctioned by the holders of political power—justified under the pretext of the "greater good". The humans disappear from the visual format. The salient erasure of humans, the powerful and the targeted, augments the visual gravity. Their razed houses are broken, exposed, and no longer capable of housing anyone. A palpable shock substitutes sentimentality. The Yamuna Pushta demolition photograph possesses an archival potency, a metaphor for a catastrophe,

drawing debates over legitimacy and possible obfuscation. Over a timeline, the image anticipates the future landscape and shall posthumously synopsize its foundation. Hence, it is a milestone document linking the designed makeover of the place and the fate (of many) linearly. These photographs bring a tension of callousness between environmental loss, brutal poverty, and casual violence to accomplish a glamorized capitalist vision (Kóvskaya 2013, pp. 10–11). Unlike images taken by various photographers documenting the demolition, the works discussed in this section state the relevance of these homes to the site they stood on.

The displacement of the people, otherwise visible in other images, takes a complex turn, as it translated into direct obliteration from "sight" and "site"; the pictorial frame turns inanimate. The photographs could be studied as a step-by-step documentation of the demolition, beginning from the presence of the homes and the fields, densely populated, like in Figures 1, 8 and 13, followed by structures that were hurriedly evacuated if not emptied, and finally, the demolition. Some images capture the belongings scattered in uninhabited homes. A puppet by the stairs and discards hint at the profession of the erstwhile resident, Figure 15. A photograph shows a discolored room with only two chairs and a table, perhaps a common space for a family, Figure 16. The door is wide open as security and privacy become irrelevant. The lattice wall of the room is partially broken, bearing the wounds of the demolition process. This suggests the spaces from which the artist must have moved to capture the photographs, walking through the abandoned semi- or totally demolished homes to capture the inanimate remains, diametrically different from the usual experience of the riverbank as a site of dense living. In Figure 17, a man sits on a nearly broken charpoy, held together by cycle tire tubes to substitute the charpoy tapes. He cooks a meal in a makeshift stove. The image is synoptic of sudden forced homelessness and the continuation of life beyond the dreadful event in an urban space, hence explaining the fragility of a home. The larger picture of the Yamuna Pushta, with many houses torn down, integrates many singular cases. Half-broken walls, large and small, exposed house floors, roofs of gunny cloth, and clothes drying on a string characterize the war-zone-like urgency of the episode. On zooming in, one sees a cycle cart being pulled by two girls, probably rummaging for what was left behind or anything that could be repurposed. Agarwal's works respectfully focus on the people and the place without intending to stir sympathy or pity from the viewers. Dramatization is evidently evaded.

Figure 15. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

Figure 16. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

Figure 17. Ravi Agarwal, *Alien Waters* series, 2004 (source: © 2005, Ravi Agarwal).

The physical absence of people and the barrenness of the place do not end the discussion but open further arguments. The violence extends from the people to the place as the razed houses, perceived as misfits within the imagined future "urban ambiance", now provide a "blank canvas" to paint a dream of a better cityscape. These works amalgamate issues that construct and channel a convincing divisive belief, shaping one's identity within the larger fabric of society, a physical form which—manifesting in a "material home"—is "rendered transient", questioning notions, beliefs, and possibilities of integrating various social and economic categories/strata (Haughton 2000, pp. 461–75).

The demolition of the homes in the Yamuna Pushta accomplished the primary step of cleaning the Yamuna—apparently from the people who had polluted it and from the physical evidence of residence. The river is "cleaned". The developmental authorities acquired a mentioned "blank canvas" to paint a "visually" appealing landscape. In 2008, a park was created in the same place. To commemorate the 50 years of existence and work of the Delhi Developmental Authority (DDA), it was named the Golden Jubilee Park (*Times News Network* 2008). The completion of the project was well timed for the DDA and as one more landmark in the list of beautifying areas near the proposed Commonwealth

Village. This section discusses select photographs by Ravi Agarwal as a near step-by-step transition of the space with a specific backdrop of the Old Railway Bridge, Figure 18. The location holds historical significance, as the Railway Bridge was one of the first colonial bridges to be constructed in India across a river. Locally, it is also known as the *lohe-ka-pul*, iron bridge, or the Yamuna *pul* Yamuna Bridge.[17] Layers of history and development are woven together.

Figure 18. Demolition of the Yamuna Pushta, © Ravi Agarwal.

The demolition is nearing its completion in Figure 19. Even though the final remnants of the Yamuna Pushta homes and structures are still present, as debris piling like dunes, there is no trace of the people. The space is cleared, revealing the river and the other side of the bank. Figure 20 shows the transformation of the space from a slum to a leveled ground and finally to a park, as planned. It is a document that particularly reflects the vision of the developmental authorities. In Figure 21, the space looks visually pleasing, with an expanse of green grass overlooking the river. The benches are painted red to be visible even from a distance. Emblems of infrastructural updation serve as a backdrop. A grey concrete motorway with a connecting underpass stands behind the bench. A temporary shed can be seen too. It certainly is not of any earlier resident but possibly/ironically of informal laborers, like the Pushta residents, required to undertake some odd job, temporarily placed in the lush space for convenience. In Figure 22, people are seen within the vision of the riverfront. Tall residential buildings are visible in the background. Some were constructed with the selling point of the Yamuna riverfront vista. Layers of history inform Figure 22: the Old Railway Bridge of colonial modernity and the park in the foreground of the urban globality. The other images provide a narration of the layer of history and an existence that was obliterated.

As seen earlier, legally, the riverfront was declared a no-development zone, a strict biodiversity zone along the river. The structures in the photographs speak differently. The concept of the Yamuna's ecology and creating a biodiversity zone were presented as grave issues, justifying the mass evictions. However, the Golden Jubilee Park seems like any other park, as a green recreational area, hence interpreting ecology from its scientific perspective to an aesthetic or retinal one (Follmann 2016, pp. 169–94).

This brings us to the proposed *dual marginalization* of the people and the river's water. The primacy of the debate was cleaning the river Yamuna's water. The ecological dimension led to the implementation of solutions with a different intent. The displacement

and uprooting of the urban poor without adequate rehabilitation facilities, followed by the creation of the visually appealing park, has not cleaned the river. One can refer to Asim Waqif's *Help: Yamuna Protest*, 2010, as an artistic document confirming the unchanged status of the river.

The photographs and the performance by Agarwal capture the aspect of shifting focus. The *Immersion.Emergence* and the *Alien Waters* series focus on the enormity of the ecological and humanitarian crisis. The river's water has been dirty, and the people lived in filth. Both entities were mismanaged by holders of authority, who were not held accountable. Alienation then could be interpreted as the indifference and estrangement towards the two entities. The marginalization of the river is palpable by the current state, drained of its essence and nearly dead, and that of the people, with their homes declared illegal, aliens to a new imagination and hence displaced, as they are nowhere in the picture.

Figure 19. Demolition of the Yamuna Pushta, © Ravi Agarwal.

Figure 20. Golden Jubilee Park, demolition of the Yamuna Pushta, © Ravi Agarwal.

Figure 21. Golden Jubilee Park, demolition of the Yamuna Pushta, © Ravi Agarwal.

Figure 22. Golden Jubilee Park, demolition of the Yamuna Pushta, © Ravi Agarwal.

10. Conclusions

The case of the Pushta has been discussed on the grounds of legality, urban development, politics, urban demography, rivers and ecology, urban environmentalism, economics, et cetera, which is evident in the complicated nature of the case. Seldom is the same discussed from the perspective of an artist who is also an activist. Photographic works generally available on the subject are predominantly images circulating in the media that focus on informative reportage, most of which are timely and episodic in nature. Agarwal's works involve a perspective of artistic research aiming at raising questions by presenting the known visuals of the urban poor through the context of citizenship, right to residence,

and respect for labor. The works ricochet between capturing the aesthetically pleasing marigold fields and the oppressive images of children sailing on plastic floats collecting non-biodegradable waste or the children dragging the cycle carts through the post-demolition Pushta lanes. The prior seems assuring with respect to the debate around the river's ecology, while the latter does not highlight the abjectness. The works unfold the underlying story of the larger developmental project and the singular case of the slum.

Agarwal at no point attempted to capture the episode of the Yamuna Pushta as an important event. For the artist, the river Yamuna has been a subject of study from the perspective of a timeless natural resource, in its natural brilliance and current neglect, and the people, not necessarily restricted to the Pushta residents, as entities existing in conjunction with the river. People do not appear hapless but as respectable workers/laborers. In the case of the Pushta and its photographs, the presence/absence of the people and the houses can be conceived as the anchoring point to the counternarrative and notion of marginalization. Populated and cluttered homes turn into debris and subsequently into a "greenfield" and a visually pleasing park befitting the global urban idiom, catering selectively to a section of the urban megapolis. If the presence of the Pushta residents polluted the water, then did their absence render it clean? If not, then can the demolition be justified? The artist literally embodies the demise of humanitarian concerns and the true ecological concern in his performance.

Given the Anthropocene, concerns about the environment hold ground. At the same time, Agarwal's artistic intent moves from solely addressing aspects of the environment and aesthetics to those of the environment and ethics. To claim that the work holds conclusive statements might not be as relevant as the issues it addresses. The essay began by analyzing the concept of "homes within an extended field". The Yamuna Pushta was the extended field in the current context. The Pushta was a community space with homes that were replaced by another community space—a park. Even as the aesthetically pleasing replaced the aesthetically objectionable, it contradicts notions of environmental ethics (Shapshay et al. 2018).

According to Baviskar, the analogy of apartheid is no exaggeration to the handling of the Yamuna Pushta slum (Amita Baviskar 2006, pp. 88–95). Majoritarianism crafted the opinions on aesthetic and environmental (in)justice, raising many questions. Who shall walk on the new parks and promenades constructed over the erstwhile Yamuna Pushta? Will the displaced ever return to even visit the site? Or will they be allowed to walk in these parks? Will their "new homes" be safe, or could they be subject to another eviction as the city grows? Will their homes ever be considered homes and not legally erasable structures? Hence, do the urban vision and the urban eye find it impossible to acknowledge and accommodate the very existence of the urban poor? Will the poor ever have any right to the city? Will they ever be represented? Will any form of effective resistance to their right in the urban spaces ever exist? And finally, did the displacement and demolition of the homes clean the water of the Yamuna?

Notes

1. To list two other evictions that took place close to the timeframe under consideration—the evictions at the slum of Banuwal Nagar took place in 2006. The number of evictions and demolitions was much smaller than in the Yamuna Pushta. So was the case with the Vikaspur slum.

2. Krishna *leelas* can be translated as divine activities, pastime, or playful activities of the Lord Krishna.

3. The earlier-mentioned artist, Atul Bhalla, elaborates this sensitive connection between the need for Yamuna's water by the populace, maintenance of its natural aqueous network, and the pre-colonial political philanthropy through some of his works.

4. The mentioned period was known as the end of the License Raj. During the License Raj, licenses were required to start an enterprise and at every level while making amendments, for example, for modifications in production capacities or even laying off workers. For further details on economic policy transition, see (Jang et al. 2013, pp. 101–15; Sanders 1977, pp. 88–96).

5. The dangerous discharge from these industries consists of cadmium, chromium, cyanide, oil grease, colors, dyes and suspended solids, and many other chemicals (Chandan Datta 1992, p. 2636). The discharge seeps into the soil and the river water, thoroughly contaminating the river water and the agricultural produce of the region.

6. The riverbank is barely accessible to those not living by the Yamuna. Numerous road barricades planted by the Delhi Police or the Delhi Developmental Authority (DDA) warn of the prosecution of trespassers and direct denial of access, preventing locals from throwing garbage and "sacred" waste from religious ceremonies into the river.

7. The project addressed sewage treatment, sanitation, and public education issues in Delhi and Agra and was implemented in three phases. See (Yamuna Action Plan n.d.).

8. In the recent Smart City Guidelines, the government has declared its mission to cover 100 cities under the Smart City plan within five years, from Financial Year (FY) 2015–2016 to FY 2019–2020. See (Statement, Smart City Mission and Guidelines 2015, p. 7).

9. The choice of the mentioned structural systems highlighted the notions of social contradictions and differential urbanism. For further details, see (Burte 2016).

10. The concentric circle zone model was based on the socioeconomic stratification within early twentieth-century Chicago.

11. Joseph Stiglitz stated a similar economic disparity caused by economic globalization in India while describing his journey from the outskirts toward the center of Bangalore. He states that one could see women on the roads breaking stones by hand on the outskirts of Bangalore, and a technological revolution was taking place just within a few miles of the city. The narration poignantly states globalization's failed promise of a reduction in the income gap. See (Stiglitz 2006, pp. 25–26).

12. The court passed the order, and although low-income housing is practically non-existent in Delhi, the number of people evicted was unimaginably large.

13. These spaces were funded, owned, or associated with the urban elite or the government. A few were granted legal status ex post facto. The Pushta residents were hopeful of a similar legalized status, which was denied.

14. As can be concluded from an interview given by Jagmohan, who was the Minister of Urban Affairs (1999–2001), with DDA under its purview, and in the Ministry of Tourism and Culture till 2004, he vehemently promoted the beautification of the Yamuna and the demolition of the slums as a prerequisite. See (Dupont 2008, pp. 83–84; Bharucha n.d.).

15. For more information on the forceful manner of eviction and the loss of income post-rehabilitation, see Kalyani Menon-Sen (2006), pp. 1969–74.

16. This study does not address gender-based division of labor, as it is not a primary concern. At the same time, including women in the cultivating activities attests to the notion of a multiple-income approach or collective labor in a family.

17. To Ravi Agarwal, the location at which the Old Railway Bridge is visible from the bank of the Yamuna holds significance. The bridge is one of the longest and oldest ones across a river in India (another one built around the same timeline is in Kolkata). It is an emblem of colonial modernity, which still holds functional value. This area of the Golden Jubilee Park is one of the few places in Delhi where one can see or access the river. Over the years, the river has been rendered inaccessible. Based on this, Atul Bhalla created a work, *Looking for Dvaipayana*, 2014, in which the artist looks for the lost waterbody.

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