

Soaking ecologies: Rethinking Asian urbanism

The Opinion

As the Paris COP21 was taking place in December 2015 the coastal city of Chennai was submerged due to unprecedented flooding, followed by a month-long rainfall. According to official figures, at least 470 people were killed. Inundation is nothing new in coastal areas, although the pace with which it is hitting us is accelerating every day. The floods remind us that we primarily live on amphibious and seasonal territories and we need new frames to understand urbanism in a mobile space.

Debjani Bhattacharyya



CHENNAI, FOR INSTANCE, is a coastal city prone to flooding. Hydraulic engineers point out that there are two kinds of urban floods: one known as urban pluvial (surface water flooding) caused by prolonged rainfall that overwhelm a city's drainage capacity. The other type is river flooding. To put it simply, flooding takes place when the line separating land from water is breached or when water appears in places where it is not supposed to be. These lines of separation are not just conceptual metaphors, but they are also materialized as fortified banks, dykes, embankments and the way we plan and design our landscapes. In a recent rethinking of this relation, Dilip da Cunha and Anuradha Mathur have repeatedly pointed out that the relation between land and water is not that of hard lines of separation, but that of soaking, of gradients, rhythms and times.¹

Taking this as a starting point I want to understand if there is a possibility to rethink the ecology of Asian cities, especially those located in deltas, estuaries and coastal areas. Looking back to our past we realize that cities across the world have been carved out, both technologically and legally, from the amphibious territories that we called swamp, fens, bogs, marshes. Today these watery spaces threaten to claim back our cities. These amphibious territories alert us that cities are spaces where we have cultivated a dry culture of living, building and design by initially draining the swamps to create habitable lands.

Engineering the urban landscape, especially within South Asia, began in an unprecedented way from the late eighteenth century. This was also a period of colonial encounter, where Europeans from temperate climates were confronted with tidal and tropical landscapes, which appeared to them as 'pestilential' and 'miasmatic' spaces of diseases. Initial projects of draining the landscape were as much a response to these epidemiological and sanitary concerns as they were intended for infrastructural expansion roads, canals and ports. For instance, the project of embanking Bombay began in 1784, around the same time Calcutta's shifting and tidal landscape was fortified so that property measurements and taxes could be fixed. This trend of draining to create new lands has continued unabated till the present as we swallow wetlands, swamps, lakes and ponds in our search for firm ground for the real estate market.

Reading the traces of water in the land

In the subcontinent, the repression of the hydrological landscapes of our cities have been further aggravated as infrastructural planning has moved away from elected municipal bodies to parastatal organizations operating through a neo-liberal market agenda. For instance, we see that the World Bank funded the Eri Scheme in Chennai through the 1970s and 1980s, under which *eris*, which the scheme claimed to be 'defunct lakes', were permanently drained to build housing. However *eris*, which are a particular kind of water reservoir,

*And after all this
you tell them about the water
how we have seen it rising
flooding across our cemeteries
gushing over our sea walls
and crashing against our homes
tell them what it's like
to see the entire ocean level with the land
[...]
but most importantly you tell them
that we don't want to leave
we've never wanted to leave
and that we
are nothing without our islands.*

Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, poet and climate activist
from the Marshall Islands, at the Paris COP21

were formed by natural dips in the land, especially in coastal towns of the subcontinent that received all their rainfall at once. These local forms of water management both prevented flooding, while also helping with water shortages.² Today these disappeared waterbodies are coming back to haunt the city as coastal waters and rainfall find no escape routes, but instead flow into our houses, offices and roads in search of their old homes. By turning to the hidden and repressed hydrologies of the cities, we realize there is also a third kind of flooding: one that happens when our visions for designing the landscape is blinkered by short-term profits of real estate.

Perhaps it is time that we try to understand coastal cities not as sites of engineering but as 'soaking ecologies'. This would demand that we imagine building and dwelling through different frames. One of the major tasks would be to read the history of the land's relation to water by learning to read the traces of water in the land. It is within those contours and lines left by the water's seasonal presence on land that we can re-learn how to live in these spaces. Through such a project of learning and un-learning we will be able to reimagine our relations with the soaking ecologies, which can provide the outline for the Asian urbanism of the future.

It must be mentioned that the idea of soaking ecologies is more capacious and slightly different from the idea of 'sponge cities' that Chinese President Xi Jinping announced at the Central Government Conference on Urbanization in 2013. Jinping has made a significant amount of funding available to create cities that can absorb rainwater through wetlands, permeable pavements and rain gardens, to name just a few means of absorption. It is an ambitious project of reengineering the urban landscape according to top down human design. The concept of soaking ecologies, however, begins from the

premise that the landscape is mobile, and that we need to learn how to live in these mobile and temporary landscapes where what is land in December can become a sheet of water during monsoon.

An invitation

The concept is also an invitation for conversation and an opening to learn from the ground how to live on it. Therefore, we need to ask whether cities located in deltas embody specific urban forms, political constellations and modes of habitation. Whenever we think of urban forms we think in terms of a dry culture, where water emerges as floods or water-logging, and the struggle is to keep the water out of these riverine cities. More than two-thirds of the world's largest and highly populated cities are coastal delta cities vulnerable to rising sea levels. The current conversation about these cities remains focused on climate-change adaptation and resilience in a very myopic manner. This conversation fails to move away from the top-down design and planning perspective. Conceptually, soaking ecologies ask what possible relation we might be able to imagine between urban forms and the waterbodies that used to pockmark the surface of our cities. We must first begin by understanding the soil and the various names we use to designate the varieties of soils. How many words do our languages have to define erosion and accretion? In these localized terms we will find a wealth of knowledge about land-water relations that might tell us how to inhabit the soaking ecologies: a lesson on how to not embank ourselves away from water, but to develop skills to live with it.

Watch this space for an announcement for a "Summer School on Soaking Ecologies" in the coming issues of The Newsletter. The idea of the summer school will be an opportunity to problematize the solid grounds that we take for granted in conceptualizing our urban environments, writing the cities' pasts and designing their futures. It will open the ground for new histories, anthropologies, urban planning, architecture and policy-making about the future of coastal cities that can accommodate the seasonal nature of the earth's surface, simultaneously making space for water and amphibious dwellings.

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References

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- 2 Coelho, K. & N.V. Raman. 2013. "From the Frying Pan to the Floodplain: Negotiating Land, Water and Fire in Chennai's Development", in A. Rademacher & K. Shivaramakrishnan (eds.) *Ecologies of Urbanism in India: Metropolitan Civility and Sustainability*, Hong Kong University Press.