

**Public Lecture**  
**On**  
**‘Yamuna and the City – Natural or Ornamental’**  
**11<sup>th</sup> November 2011**

Toxics Link in collaboration with Indian International Center organized a public lecture on 11<sup>th</sup>, December 2011 on ‘Yamuna and the City – Natural or Ornamental’ to discuss the ideas around the landscape of the river at the Indian International Center, New Delhi. Landscapes of rivers, ecology and nature have been shaped by institutions of "progress," through science, engineering and politics, over time. Nature has ‘served’ humankind to become ornamental rather than exist as an entity in its own right. The river Yamuna when it flows through a city like Delhi has to be content with being a controlled water body, rather than a free flowing entity with its rich biodiversity and shifting river bed. The public lecture sought to discuss the future of the river, and can it navigate between the streams of institution imaginations?

Mr. Ravi Agarwal (Director, Toxics Link) inaugurated the session by welcoming the Panelist and the audience. The panelist included eminent speakers like, Mr. Manoj Mishra (Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan) and Mr. Kuldeep Singh (Town Planner).

In the inaugural address Mr. Agarwal said that the most dominant idea prevailing is that the river should be cleaned, however cleaning of the river is just on aspect, as rivers around the world have been cleaned over the past fifty years. In his view the problem is much more complex as the rivers are not just channels that need to be cleaned up but whole eco system; they have their own trajectory and identity. He said that the idea of river engineering became predominant since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first river to be engineered was the river Nile. There has been a history of hits and misses to tame the river and make them flow the way we want them to flow for our own purpose. This has been a contentious issue in Delhi for the CWG and metros being build being on the river bed. Water has become a hydraulic issue and anything that became land became a planning issue.

Mr. Manoj Mishra who has been trying to understand the river for the past 5 years in the city, both upstream and the downstream as a researcher, presented on the ‘Yamuna and the City’. Shedding light on the background and the origin of the river he said that Delhi is the first city on the river and that there is no other city upstream of Delhi which is on the river and that the city has no other water front except for the river. But what has the city done to it. It has drunk all its water. He said that downstream of Wazirabad there is no water of the river. The place has invaded the riverbed and in turn discharged all its waste into the river.

He further pointed out that according to the first master plan of Delhi 1962, the land that comprised of the river bed was meant for the floods alone. Learning from 1978 floods in 1979 the Yamuna standing Committee, decided that the minimum distance of embankment from either side of the river will be 5 kms although even then at no place it was more than 3.5 kms. Thus,



according to this stipulation nothing could have been or should have been done in the flood plane as it was already less than the technically established stipulation.

He further stated that from 1999-2008 the river witnessed the most ill-fated phase, it saw no floods and during this period everything that could have gone wrong with the river and the riverbed ensued. He also touched on the towering follies of the DDA and said that many unauthorized colonies lying on the riverbed were removed as they were polluting the river, however the Yamuna bank Metro Depot Station was approved, a large part of the bank was allocated for the Common Wealth Games Village and also 16 hectors of land was allocated to the Delhi Transport Corp without prior approval yet DDA gave the land, all invading into the flood plain. Also, 300 unauthorized household were removed to replace two residential towers of Delhi Metro by 2010 that has all the illegalities associated with it. They have also raised embankment and actually channelized the river. He said that the state has left no stone unturned to kill the river.

Throwing light on the cultural and the religious significance of the river he said that the river was not just a water body but a divine form and thus whatever one may try one cannot take the river away.

He urged for the need of planning that could save the river and equip the city and the river for the worst scenario. He induced to carry out the best possible risk assessment, Disaster Preparedness and Management Study and the action plan for the area. He further recommended that the active river Yamuna edge by the Yamuna Standing Committee should be left to nature beyond that groundwater, recharge water bodies should be created and organic farming should be promoted. There is a need to look at the water holistically and ecologically.

He also urged to inculcate the most important aspect of planning i.e. Doctrine of public trust which should be the only guiding principle.

While Mr. Kuldeep Singh, making a pessimistic prediction said that in the last few years a lot of flood plane of the river has been lost and will continue to be so, for various reasons the most important being the fact that there is absence of a positive scheme.

He said that the population was expanding and new institutions were coming up; land is required for various purposes, for institutional developments, roads and transport. Due to the mounting pressure this land comes out from the river as the river has the potential to generate high value land hence once it is channelized, it can be developed. Thus, the public authorities get inclined to move in that direction and one can gauge the consequences. This kind of development overlooking the river is the kind of land monopolization, manipulation that the public authority has learnt to do in the last 25 years. Flood plains are being lost and the river is being channelized and the commercial exploitation of the river is taking place.

He pointed out that there are no schemes except that of DDA which are mere big words. He further said that Integration was needed in terms of the two cities, the west and the east Delhi that lies on either side of the river.



Mr.K T Ravindran said that in his view it is best to leave the river alone and should not be seen as something to be exploited and suggested that the best way is to create two ecosystem along the two sides of the river which means planting of plants and trees which can survive in that particular kind of soil. He pointed out that the DDA has negligible understanding of the environment and their idea of environment is limited to creating little pretty parks with some flowers. Expressing his concerns he said that a bio diversity park being constructed in the river bed is reflective of the fact that the river bed is ready for an assault.

He said that the river required ecological expertise which the DDA does not have and emphasized that the DDA should be trained in matters pertaining to hydrology and ecology. While the Yamuna Development Authority should be turned into a technically competent authority that can deal with development from an ecological perspective. He suggested that this authority should be turned into a technically competent authority. Further, he urged for capacity building programs for the Yamuna development authority enabling them to deal with matters pertaining to water and ecology.

There was a question answers session where questions were raised on the capacity of the soils to absorb toxicity and transfer them to the plants and also if some soil gets contaminated by the toxic elements. Also there were suggestions that one should create consciousness about the importance of the river as the river is missing from the consciousness of the people as a part of their life, people no longer care about the river and the kids do not know much about the river.