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SABARMATI RIVERFRONT DEVELOPMENT AN ALTERNATE PERSPECTIVE

The Sabarmati Riverfront Development, both as an idea four decades ago and approaching reality now, has raised interesting and at times acrimonious debates on the larger questions of development, design, polemic and environmental concerns, specifically as relevant in the Indian context. Interventions in the public realm are never free of such debates or controversies, increasingly so when the larger development vision is driven by a select few. While one has to recognize that it is simply not practical to address every single viewpoint in such public projects, it is critical that the vision in principle address a larger spectrum of concerns that balances society, culture, environment and of course economics.

Much has been written about the physical and spatial design of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development; as much on its impact on traditional social fabric, issues of equity and so on. This article intends to situate the debate around issues of

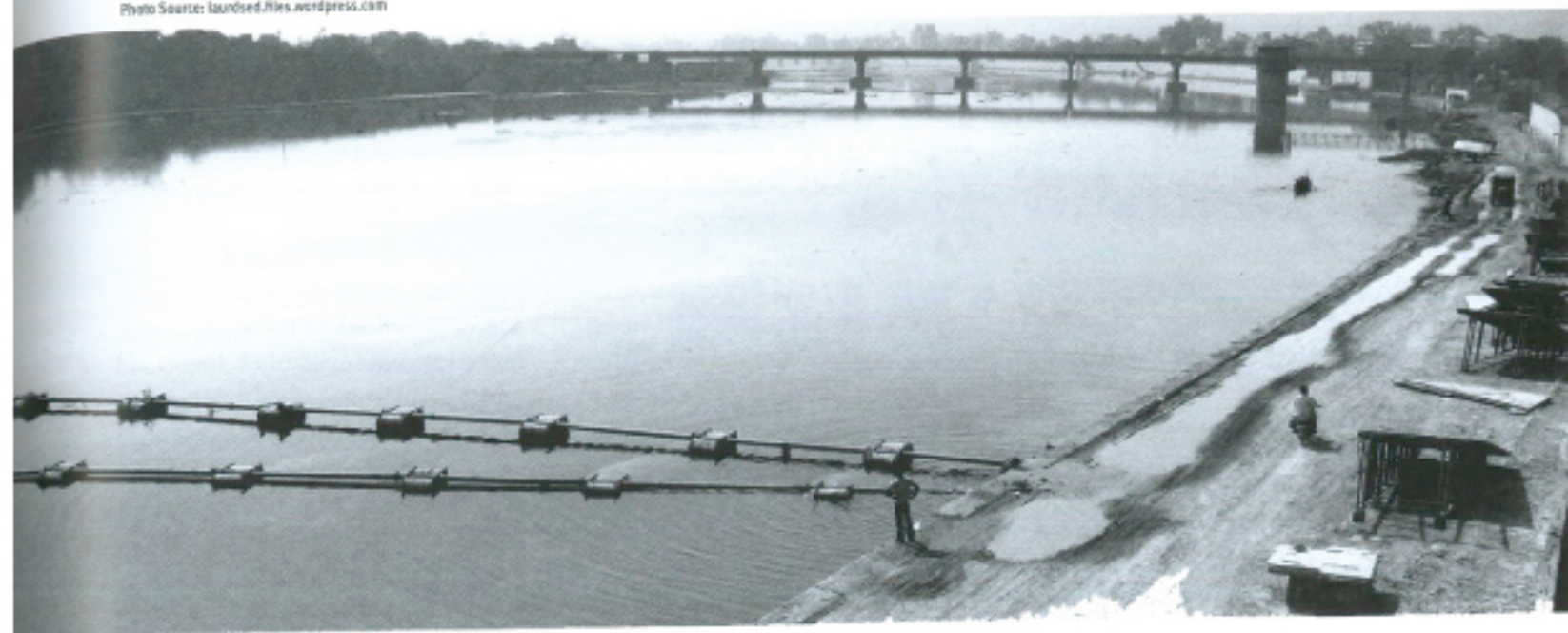
environment and ecology. Of course, it is quite futile to separate these issues and examine them independent of each other in a transitional society such as ours unless one takes an extremely narrow and limited view of development.

Every society has developed specific and unique responses to the natural environment. Traditional societies in particular tend to relate to elements of nature in a manner that is beyond the utilitarian and mundane. Cultural practices evolved over millennia recognize, respect, internalize and respond to these elements that respect their intrinsic and dynamic nature. Rivers in particular evoke not merely ideas of recreation or real estate but of an essential connectedness with nature; frequently invoked in spiritual, religious or cultural events. It has been particularly distressing to note the extreme disengagement of India's planning and development processes from lakes and rivers over the past half century. Cities have continually turned their

backs – literally and figuratively – to river systems that in most instances have been the originators of settlements. A sudden shift to engineering and technology based system for managing water needs has meant that the role and perceived value of natural water systems vis-à-vis cities has taken a serious beating. Rivers are seen at best to serve human needs in the form of a convenient drainage channel. A rich tradition of long-standing hydraulic civilization has effectively been buried under 'slums', landfills and sewage works. In this context, the Sabarmati Development is certainly a distinct and welcome break from the standard way of acknowledging rivers in cities.

Sabarmati is typical of the smaller river systems in peninsular India and is essentially a seasonal river whose flow depends on the rainfall in its catchment in the Aravalli hills of Rajasthan. The very nature of such river systems transforms the landscape they meander through between extremes – a dry river bed that

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can be walked across to a raging torrent. While such systems are 'understood and tolerated' in their natural setting, they start becoming 'inconvenient' when seen through specific design frameworks. As stated in the EIA report of 2007, "The Sabarmati is a monsoon river that remains partially dry for most part of the year. But for water from the Narmada canal that met it upstream of Ahmedabad, the Sabarmati lacked aesthetic appeal. Its (riverfront) is unlikely to be an inviting public place conducive to cultural and recreational activities."

It is extremely important to understand this philosophical shift in the framework of aesthetics that does not see the river as the original reason for the city's coming into existence; rather it questions the nature of and reason for the river's existence in the city.

The stated vision for Ahmedabad to become a 'world class' city can be a useful starting point to understand some of the

shifts and conflicts between perceptions and goals of 'designer' and the 'designed for'. It is not too surprising to note that visions of world class city are invariably rooted in the Neverland of leisure. What is surprising though is the kind of leisure that is seen as aspirational. "It's like a dream that one lives. Waking up by the river, driving down the riverside; board meeting with vast blue vista in the background and then a cruise across the water for a power lunch on the other bank... And then, a dinner on the floating restaurant with family to chill out... In the midst of concrete and steel that is the dream that city planners are conjuring for apne Amavad."

¹ The process of diverting and disciplining an otherwise ugly and bothersome river does yield dividends, it seems.

As declared by a prominent thought leader like KPMG, the Sabarmati Riverfront Project is in the list of '100 Most Innovative Projects'; hailing it as 'a project towards urban regeneration and environmental improvement, which

will transform the river as a focal point of leisure and recreation'. Words such as 'urban regeneration', 'environmental improvement' and 'innovative' seem to often describe and decorate the development, albeit in a prosaic manner and here in lies the contradiction between the construed and the constructed. Depending on the lens from which the development is viewed – environment, social integration and equality, urban place making, infrastructure or political – the hierarchies of contradiction or the 'lost opportunities' may differ but nonetheless are significantly cumulative towards 'Sabarmati's Sorrow'.²

It is easy enough to see the contradiction between the ground reality of a shifting, dynamic and living water system with myriad facets and the 'requirement' of a constant and unchanging canvas to help the city arrive on the global map of modernity. More so, when one's vision of what is 'modern' is itself rooted in such a disconnected and irrelevant plane.

As disturbing as the shift in one's perception and relationship to natural systems in our cities, equally so in our response to such systems. It does not take years of studies to understand that peninsular river systems based on the monsoon in tropical India are vastly different from snow-fed ones in temperate Europe. That riverside cities with centuries of history anywhere in the world have distinct and often unique relationships to the rivers that were the seed of their birth. Ignoring these simplistic truisms have in fact been the cause of much conflict in the case of Sabarmati Riverfront development both intellectually as well as physically. Attempting to articulate a river system that can change from a few metres in cross sectional flow to several hundred metres in a matter of weeks is an extreme challenge in any environment. The challenge is compounded when the desired end result is a predetermined model drawn from distant cultures and climates. It is unfortunate that the obviously alien aesthetic framework imposed on the river is continually justified with what basically amounts to pseudo-science.

The principal designer has been reported and quoted extensively in the media on the concept of controlling a river system based on hydrological principles. 'Pinching the River' is a fond phrase of the architect which refers to the 'art' of training and controlling the river so that it does not flow into the city's nullahs and floods the low-lying areas'... "If you want to reach plants some distance away, you tighten your grip on the hose so that the water spurts out further. This does not affect the flow of water in the hose. In the same manner, narrowing the river will not interfere with the natural flow of water."⁴ It is interesting to note the designers' imagi-

native metaphor comparing the river to that of a hose pipe. While it is true that both convey water from point A to point B, the similarity ends there.

The questions posed are pertinent, as the riverfront development reflects an attitude of entitlement to the environment rather than acknowledging the river as an invaluable natural resource. By equating river ecology to 'hose piped water', the project envisages a sad understanding of the Sabarmati merely as an aesthetically pleasing 'water feature' to benefit human pleasures and rarely makes an attempt to comprehend the embodied ecological dynamics associated with it. Rather than traversing the universal 'promenade approach' and by recognizing the non-perennial ecological dynamics of the river system, the development could have attempted to, "look at alternate water management techniques (both storm and waste) to connect the city back to water, re-defining the edge, defining accessibility mixed with utilities and to bring about a dynamic landscape, a hard and a softscape which at times would be flooded and some parts retained, thus making one observe an ever changing and dynamic phenomenon."⁵ It would have certainly been interesting to see the completely varied solutions that could have been derived if, rather than stressing on the heroics of 'channelizing the river', the designers had explored a more nuanced or literate dimension so as to "evolve a strategy for the development of a coherent urban system which is capable of handling the pressures of a fast developing city". It is rather unfortunate that "the vision is limited to focus on the development of the riverfront on either side of the Sabarmati by construct-

ing embankments and roads, laying water supply lines and trunk sewers, building pumping stations, and developing gardens and promenades."⁶

In the end, though the project claims to address problems of flooding, sewage treatment, and "removal of slums" and providing a plethora of trade opportunities to the city, for the city of Ahmedabad it's an immense and invaluable opportunity lost. Lost in terms of addressing development issues that negotiates between ground realities and political visions; of positioning and conceiving a development (that was most definitely required considering the lack of open spaces in the city) not in an overbearing manner but more in terms of strategic interventions and localization. A lost opportunity in addressing relations of river floodplains and urban development, one that recognizes contextual hydrology and ecology and is not fraught with Western 'concretizing' techniques to achieve sweeping narratives of progress, beautification and cleanliness as seen and associated with the present development model.

If the Sabarmati project is the leitmotif in the context of river and waterfront redevelopment projects now popping up in Indian cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Surat, Kolkata and Lucknow, then the larger question that looms the planning and design fraternity of the country is the understanding of our hydraulic civilization traditions. As observed by Kelly Shannon, "It is paradoxical that the old, low-tech/low-cost and rich systems of irrigation networks, tanks, ponds and ghats are not maintained and, in fact, disappearing, while largest investments are being made

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to build new dams, contain water in pipes and embank riverfronts. Urbanization and flood control are not developed in tandem, but in different sectors and often with contradictory consequences."⁷ The design fraternity undertaking such 'mega-projects' probably needs to engage in a more multi-disciplinary approach that equates demands of ecology, pressures of development, associated livelihood, contextualization of 'recreation' and more importantly recognize that rivers are meandering by nature, dynamic in flow and supports living ecosystems and are not designed on a drafting board to flow in slide rule straights.

In the case of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development, it is unfortunate that the large scale intervention pays scant regard to an entire river system and limits the 'vision' of development to a stretch of 'frontage' as seen relevant to the immediacy of the city. Given the long tradition of design engagement (both traditional and contemporary) that the city is fa-

mous for, the strong economic climate of the region and the overwhelming political support the development has garnered, the intervention could have easily been positioned to benchmark the highest standards addressing public space engagement as well as the future of development in transitional societies. Rather than recreate insipid versions of riverfronts from the Seine or the Thames, the Sabarmati Riverfront could easily have leapfrogged a century of design thought, demonstrating effective integration of natural systems, cultural appropriateness and development needs. It would have been extremely interesting to examine how dynamic river systems could have been understood, addressed and articulated in a manner that other public projects in the country could emulate for decades to come.

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