

Title: Planning the Bela: Reflections on Riverine Planning in modern Delhi

Principal Investigator (PI)

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Overview of the project:

A 44 km stretch demarcated by generations of master planners into rural and urban segments, the Yamuna's floodplains in Delhi are home to a vast array of built form and settlement typologies. A considerable portion of this region witnesses agricultural activity, particularly the four revenue estates—Bela, Inderpat, Chiragah (north), and Chiragah (south)—totalling approximately 8000 acres which were carved out of the floodplains in the 1930s. Bela Estate, occupying khasras 169 and 170 from the old railway bridge to the Delhi Secretariat, abuts the eastern flank of Shahjahanabad. This project aims to understand the planning history of the Yamuna in Delhi. It will examine the unsteady institutionalisation of planning apparatuses in Delhi with respect to Bela Estate, delving into the planning archive to delineate the manifold ways in which local governance and civic groups have consistently recalibrated the river's place in the city from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century.

Research Methodology:

Data collection for this project will be premised upon archival as well as field visits. The former will primarily be in the Delhi State Archives, while the latter will take the form of Focus Group Discussions with members of farming communities who are currently witnessing eviction and dispossession in the project site. The project will treat the archive reflectively, not simply as a transparent source of information but as a carefully constructed repository of knowledge deemed worthy of documentation by the state. Interactions with respondents on the field will be ethnographic in nature, taking the form of semi-structured discussions without losing sight of the privilege which comes with adopting the position of the researcher in a field of marginality.

Deliverables:

The project will aim to create a digital, publicly available archive from the primary sources which it accesses for its data collection. This will be an interactive website, which will create a user-friendly interface in English as well as Hindi for visitors to get a ready idea of the manner in which the Yamuna's floodplains in Delhi have been reorganised spatially and ecologically since the mid-nineteenth century.

In order to broaden the reach of this project, one of the deliverables will also be an op-ed in a leading national daily. This will focus on the evolving nature of the land use and governance regimes in the project site, underscoring the troubling ironies of evicting nature-based livelihoods like farming to pave the way for ecological restoration and rejuvenation of the Yamuna and its floodplains.



Farm in Bela Estate, Delhi
Source: Anubhav Pradhan

Focussing on planning for the region from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, a research paper will also be written as a project deliverable to assess the role of not only the imperial state machinery but also emergent civil society groups in determining the land use and planning modalities for the Bela under British rule.