

No river, no dream

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When you say the river is a force of nature, and the monsoon is part of that, we have a dynamic, volatile, changing phenomenon, and everything that follows. For centuries, we have adapted to that dynamic condition. But as you said, with our engagement with Western cultures, one of the things we have adapted is a belief that technology can solve everything. Some people call it a technological utopia. I would say technological arrogance. Of course, we rely on technology. But if we assume

Bang-al is derived from the small dykes farmers make. So, perhaps the name of the nation, a national bearing, refers to the ethos of agriculture.

You mentioned how rivers and water systems are more or less stable in the European context, whether naturally or processed. But things are changing now. The monsoon is arriving in Europe also. They are now considering different rhetorics—let the water flow, let the rivers flow. They contained the river before; now it's about flow, overflow, and the dynamics of water. So they are

urbanism. But what is going to be the form of the city? That's very challenging.

It is possible to create a new type of water-adaptive, resilient city. That will be a new revolution. The tragedy is that the policymakers don't have this kind of knowledge, and that's why I think it's important for a new leadership to transform the decision-makers. That's why, for the past 25 years, I keep talking, letting the decision-makers know that if they fail, a crisis will develop. Look at what happened in 2012 in China. In Beijing, the capital was flooded, and so many people drowned. They have begun to realise that we need a spongy city and different nature-based solutions, not an industrial solution. But the so-called advanced industrial civilisation is still in control. We have to revise so many things, including university textbooks and the ways we educate our people. The entrenched system doesn't believe that a spongy city will work. But I think that's the future. We need a new school.

KKA: In China, you have worked with 300 cities. In Bangladesh, every town has a river. I haven't come across any town without a river. The river may be active, may be a little dead, a little sad, but there is a river. There is still a deep historical relationship with rivers—the deep structure you talk about. But increasingly we have forgotten that because of this utopia of technology, and perhaps the lure of capitalism. So what's going to be the form of the city in an adaptive process—that's the key question.

KY: We should not just follow whatever the Western part of the world is doing. We should invent a new type of urbanism. That's the only way we can transform from dystopia. You mentioned the utopia of technology—actually, it is a dystopia of technology. From dystopia, we should move towards our local, native utopia in order to build a new city based on adaptation to agricultural landscape practices. I think you need to do it: build a new city that has a completely different form, and then we can show the whole world what the new urbanism of the next century is—one that can adapt to climate change and other challenges.

KKA: If you look at the environment of Dhaka, it's surrounded by a

combination of floodplains, agricultural land, and river basins. It is a fantastic landscape, increasingly being changed simply by landfilling—as if there can't be any other response other than landfill. The argument has been that we need to build, we need to put up buildings, we need it for the economy, and so on. I personally feel that ecology and economy need not be enemies. There are strong laws in Bangladesh about the conservation and retention of such a critical landscape, but the laws are not maintained because of the forces of the economy. I think there can be a third form, what you referred to as a new urban form, because the conventional pattern of building and the conventional mode of construction will always lead to a crisis, as it is based on a 'dry ideology.'

You have already mentioned two things—rivers as forces of nature and rivers as life. If we accept that, of course, the future of rivers is the same as the future of human civilisation.

KY: Yes, well, I will say: free the river—that's the future. The river is a vital living organism of the whole world, particularly of the monsoon region. When I was in Bangladesh, I was amazed at how productive your water system was, with the fish and agriculture. It was the same in China. Now we destroy the whole system. The river is key for the planet in providing an ecosystem. We try to build grey infrastructure to replace those services, and that becomes so expensive. That causes all the problems.

So, we have to think in terms of services—how much the river produces, how much abundance the river can provide: life's biomass, everything. You even mentioned silt. Silt is the base for productivity. Without silt, no production. Imagine how much fertiliser we use today, how many chemicals we produce, and meanwhile how much we risk. Sixty percent of chemicals run into the river. China consumes 30 per cent of global fertilisers. India, Bangladesh, plus America consume another third. Sixty per cent of all those chemicals run into the water. Water itself loses the capacity for cleaning and producing nutrients that farmers need.

The second is certainly what you mentioned at the beginning as cultural

qualities. Rivers produce so much picturesque, poetic, and cultural spirit of humankind, whether in India or the USA or China. Talking about culture, the only American literature I read was about Hucklberry Finn travelling along the Mississippi River. So the same in Bangladesh. But when I travel today, I see a loss of the poetic content. I don't see any trees around the river, no villages along the river, no communal life, no fishermen—that's a huge loss. It's not spiritual life anymore.

The other thing is the power of regulation. The surface of the river is regulated; that's why it leads to so much climate change. In the dry season or in the wet season, you have the river basin system that regulates the river. Note that the Amazon River is still very primitive. So you can imagine what it used to be: an abundance of forests with water flowing underneath the canopy. You did not see the water; you did not see the river. Green and blue, everything together, sponge-like—that is what rivers should be. That's the global future.

I say all rivers should be covered with forests, that there's no hard boundary. We see the river as a productive ecosystem—the most biodiverse areas are within the river and around the river, including the wildlife system and everything. This is nature regulating itself, with the meanderings, the tributaries—it acts as a great regulator; it's a home for the soul. No river, no dream. Kids today don't even know how to draw the picture, as the river is now concrete. Freeing the river doesn't mean reverting to a primitive agricultural civilisation. We are upgraded. We now understand the science of the river. We are based on the modern science of the river. We now know how to adapt to it, not because of survival needs alone, but because we are sensitive. The move from unconsciousness to a conscious understanding of the river is the future of the planet, the future of humankind. So, the future of the river is the future of human civilisation.

This is a shorter version of a conversation between Kongjian Yu and Kazi Khaleed Ashraf, held in 2022 for Jamini Art Journal.



Liupanshui Minghu Wetland Park, Guizhou, by Turenscape.

that it will solve, control, and manage everything, including the dynamic condition of the monsoon, that's not happening.

You mentioned dykes. Dykes could also be small in scale. In Bengal, farmers make dykes to control and manage the flow of water and its containment on a small scale. But that's very different from technologically scaled-up embankments. There, you want to control nature. Farmers didn't want to control nature; they wanted to manage only certain sections of the flow of water. Regarding the word Bengal or Bangala, Emperor Akbar's chronicler Abul Fazl mentioned that the 'al' in the word

changing their policies, while in our context we are still beholden to their old technologies.

KY: Yes, I think that's the tragedy of human society. We keep on making mistakes. We forget our heritage. The difference with other regions is in the scale of the technology; ours is much smaller, localised, it's sponge-like. It's not a big dyke; it's not a dam. That makes a big difference. Now it is linked to a massive industrial scale. The old practice is family-based, individual-based, and village-based. That creates a very resilient system. From what I saw in Dhaka, you have a big potential for



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