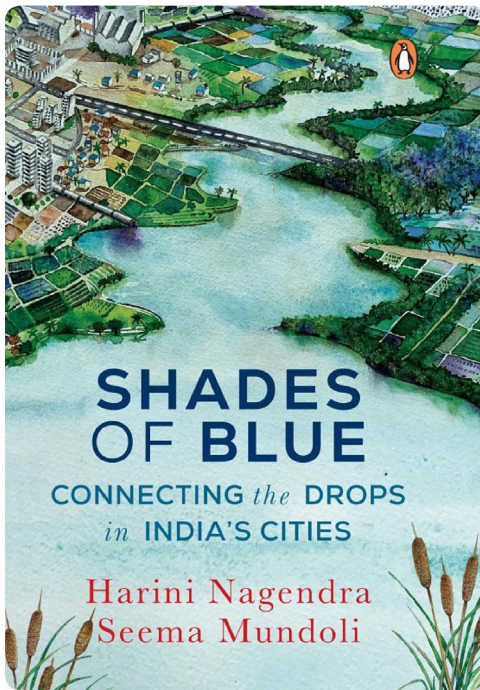


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# THE BLUE PALETTE



## SHADES OF BLUE: CONNECTING THE DROPS IN INDIA'S CITIES

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The book highlights country's water challenges, blending history, mythology, and modern issues while offering hopeful solutions and celebrating the efforts of environmental warriors and professionals tackling water scarcity and floods.

The Indian cities often face two extremities with water, either scarcity in the summers or excess water and flooding in the monsoons. In both cases, the important issue that comes up is the same, poor management of the resource. With the growing concerns of climate change, it has become crucial to educate the public and create awareness regarding the careful management of the resource, not only at household scales but at meso and macro scales too. It is of utmost importance that every human, of all sections of society and all age groups, is made aware of the crisis we, as a race are dealing with currently and everyone should ideally feel responsible towards contributing positively towards the environment we are living in. However, it is also equally important that these issues are not raised and discussed only when they become a concern or in their most negative forms but are talked about in association with positive attributes, revealing the reasons to celebrate their existence. Only then will the civilization be able to deal with concerns and acknowledge their responsibilities towards the environment as a resource as well as learn to celebrate it in all its forms.

There is extensive research and literature on the issue of water across the globe specifically concentrated on South Asian continents as well, due to the complex issues that engulf the region. The book written by Sunil Amrith, 'Unruly Waters' elaborates on histories that have shaped the 'waters' of South Asia based on factors such as engineering, hydraulics, politics, and geographies. Another book by Professor Brahma Chellaney named, 'Water: Asia's New Battleground' discusses the hard truth that is lurking upon us concerning water stress. With developing countries, growing populations, and great powers at play, aiming to ascend the economic graphs, the vulnerabilities that the Asian geographies will encounter due to climate change and conflicts are unavoidable unless necessary actions are put in mechanism immediately. Looking at more specific writings on the Indian sub-continent, the book that is the result of slow journalism by Arati Kumar Rao, 'Marginlands – Indian Landscapes on the Brink' takes us through different regions

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of the country, narrating stories that bring about the fragilities of the landscapes within the continent. The book by Mridula Ramesh, ‘Watershed: *The Story of India’s Water in the Age of Climate Change*’ delves into groundwater degradation raising concerns over India’s water security and resilience.

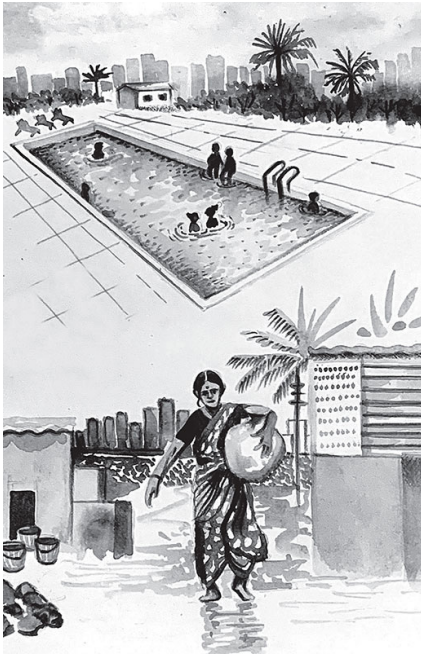
While some of the above works of literature can be quite complex and technical for the readers, such grave issues must be reached out to the professionals and persons from all fields through narrations that are comprehensible while making an impact too.

“Shades of Blue — *Connecting the Drops in India’s Cities*” is an attempt to narrate stories of our relationship with ‘Water’ through various lenses. The book was preceded by the co-authored book “Cities and Canopies – *trees in Indian Cities*” by the authors which brought about the essence and importance of trees and vegetation in human life, lightly holding on to nostalgia, while also talking about their scientific properties and cultural significance.

It follows a similar accessible reading format that explores myriad experiences and relationships of civilizations with this basic and limited resource which has been an anchor to our being.

The structure of the book consists of chapters focussing on water networks in different cities across the sub-continent, namely Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Udaipur, Chennai, Bengaluru, Guwahati & Lakshwadeep islands, intersected in between with multiple chapters that capture stories, anecdotes and fascinating facts from history, mythology, literature, anthropological, social and current issues.

The chapter, *Delhi: Re-imagining the Yamuna*, explores the association of the growth of Delhi across its evolution with the Yamuna which supported the city through nullahs and kunds, and the current struggle to clean up Yamuna. Another chapter, *Mumbai: Wrestling land from the ocean*, is named aptly as it details the making of Mumbai by reclaiming land from the sea, the mangroves that once protected the coast, and the thinning relation of the koliwada fishermen, who were the original settlers of the region and their vulnerabilities in each context. The shift from the West Coast to the East Coast takes us to the chapter on Kolkata where the dynamics of wetlands landscapes take prominence discussing the traditional methods engaged by the city in converting its waste into a useful source of livelihood through its extensive East Kolkata wetland systems, which not only supports fish culture but also protects the city from floods with its spongelike characteristics. In another water & city-related chapter, *Udaipur: City of Lakes*, paints a dreamy picture of hills and lakes and how the region is now threatened by desertification. When city and water are the topics, Chennai can’t be left far behind, with its historical *eri* system for irrigation now oscillating between drought and floods in a



vicious cycle, while Bengaluru: a landlocked city of tanks and lakes, historically known as the land of ‘sandras’ i.e. lakes, the word which suffixed the names of surrounding neighbourhoods. Today, the areas are still known by the name that includes ‘sandra’ in it, but the lakes are grabbed for making malls, public infrastructures, and leveraging the real estate benefits. Yet another chapter brings about the challenges faced by the city of Guwahati which is a water-land mosaic along the mighty Brahmaputra. The last one of the water cities covered is the island of Lakshadweep, which has overpumped its limited freshwater so much so that the saline water is now infused into the inland systems and hence, the quote ‘water, water everywhere, not a drop to drink...’

Interspersed between these stories of the cities, are the chapters that break the pattern and talk about water through diverse lenses. A chapter dedicated to songs of the river, speaks about the lyrical existence of water through songs, which starts painting a picture of the water landscapes in the minds of listeners- capturing the fluidity of the land. From the doha’s of Kabir to the songs of Bollywood and from the folk songs and poems of Western and Asian countries to songs of celebrated musician, Bhupen Hazarika that concentrate around mighty Brahmaputra and the inequalities of the society, the chapter thus brings forth the interconnectedness of shades of blue and celebrates its existence in various parts of the world, in diverse languages and regions. It concludes with stating facts about the existential crisis of the Blue Whale, whose music (read; echo), we failed to listen to...

The chapter *Tinker, Tailor, Mapper, Spy: Secret Expeditions to Map Rivers* tells stories of the mapping of Brahmaputra by the British by training Indians in the science of mapping who would later be sent as spies to Tibet, sneaking across European soldiers. Many such expeditions of mappers were the initial efforts to fathom the geographies or paths of rivers, which remain in dusty archives. But most importantly, their stories tell us about the efforts to understand the terrains and topography, in search of sources of rivers, and understand the diverse conditions along the length of the rivers in Asian geographies.

The debate around the ambitious river-linking project is discussed at length in the chapter: *Interlinking Rivers*, which documents facts from the initiation of this project by Colonel Arthur Cotton in 1858. The massive network of linkages, dams, and reservoirs forming the South Asian water grid, though seems like an ideal solution to reach water to various dry parts of the country, comes with the challenges of ownership, political controls, and most importantly, the threats it will impose on the hydrology and ecology of the rivers. The plans of China to divert the waters of the main tributary that feeds the Brahmaputra are also discussed as part of human interventions in the natural river



networks, which will not only impact the downstream delta but also the socio-political relationship between the two countries. It leaves the readers with thought-provoking questions regarding the future of such projects, whether should they be pursued, and if yes, then the importance of addressing the interlinked and layered issues that might turn out to be disastrous in the future if not considered today.

While discussing the issues, threats, and loss of water resources across the South Asian landscapes, the authors do not forget to celebrate the high-spirited water warriors. They introduce the word ‘*Solastagia*’ – ecological grief – derived from the Latin root word *solaciam* and the Greek root word *algia* (comfort + distress), first described by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht. This anxiety and uncertainty about the future while living in a highly deteriorating environment has led to the emergence of water warriors – people who have committed themselves to doing their bit and beyond through environmental activism. They have filed PILs, challenged municipalities and questioned their actions on deteriorating water sources, brought together communities to become stewards of the nature they live with, etc., which has led them to create awareness through events, walks, and nature clubs. This ownership that has been driven by memories of their relationship with nature in their lifetime has encouraged them to mobilize communities towards a common cause. Such warriors residing within every corner of the cities in our country are our hope to ensure collective action towards combating oneself’s solastalgia and achieving larger goals.

The profession of landscape architecture also allows one to shoulder responsibility and find its niche at the intersection of environment and human habitation at various parts of this narrative. The landscape professionals can drive the discussions through their work at addressing issues of water management at different scales, interpreting traditional wisdom to suit the current context, developing proposals for Blue-Green infrastructure, etc., to name a few, while ensuring that our work steps us forward toward the betterment of the environment.

Though the content of the book manages to touch upon all the critical issues related to water, it has limited itself to indulge in in-depth details about each of the issues covered. However, despite pinpointing the concerns that have led us to the current state of being with the precious resource, it also manages to leave its reader hopeful. The book manages to trigger thoughts on ethical and sensitive living. While it lingers in sub-conscious minds, each chapter sets a beginning to a whole body of research that can be delved into in each chapter, opening multiple possibilities of way forward.

