

## From the Sabarmati's point of view

*Riverfront development shouldn't be about just beauty and aesthetics. It should address issues of environment and ecology too.*

Throughout history, rivers have been our emotional connect to nature, an essential ingredient of religious or cultural events. Today the same rivers are no longer viewed as an integral part of our lives but merely as a thing of beauty or as a convenient drainage system, depending on our whims and fancies. The riverfront development project along the Sabarmati, which spans a 11 km stretch through Ahmedabad, is no different.

The Sabarmati is a peninsular monsoon river, fed from the catchment area in the Aravalli hills of Rajasthan that remains dry for the most part of the year. However, during the rainy season, the surface of the river stretches from a few metres to several hundred metres in a matter of weeks. The riverfront project has been hailed as a move towards urban regeneration & environmental improvement, which will transform the river to a focal point of leisure and recreation.



That may be true, but the bottom line is that we will be replacing a shifting, dynamic living water system with a constant, unvarying, modern concrete canvas- all in the name of urban development.

To attempt to design the riverfront on a pre-existing model drawn from foreign cultures and climatic conditions is folly. Instead, what needs to be acknowledged is that a river is an invaluable resource and should not be treated as a hose pipe system, that can be conveniently 'pinched' to control its flow or direction. Instead of blindly following the western system of concretising, we need to better understand our own heritage, our emotional links to water, and our rich, vibrant traditions.



## Scope of the project

The project will reduce the riverbed from a variable width of 600-300 m to a fixed width of 275m [1]. Rather than channelizing the river, a far more interesting option would have been to develop a pulsating, living landscape around it. Instead of concretising the entire area, an option of both hard & soft land, some bricked up and some left as an open expanse, which at times would be flooded, and occasionally dry and retained, would create an ever changing dynamic picture with the river as the focal point. The river would be seen as a spiritual and historical entity with a life and breath of its own and not just as something to be simply 'controlled'!

Unfortunately, today we would rather invest huge amounts to build dams, piped water systems and embank riverfronts. The expected cost of this project is to the tune of Rs. 15 billion, which will be covered by the sale of parts of the riverfront (15%) to private investors, as well as by funding from the JNNURM programme [1].



## Systems of the past

How easily we forget our existing local technology, our low cost & rich system of irrigation networks, our tanks, ponds and ghats, which though traditional and a complete eco system by themselves, sadly are ill maintained and fast disappearing.

What is essential is to look at the entire river system as a whole, and not 'develop' an isolated stretch or 'frontage' for any river. Designers need to recognise rivers, to understand them as a meandering, living entity, dynamic in nature, which cannot conveniently be straightened and designed on drafting boards.

Instead of an insipid copy of riverfronts in developed countries, like on the Siene & the Thames, the riverfront project would have set the bar higher had it incorporated a holistic design, integrating our magnificent traditional natural systems, our cultural appropriateness and development needs.

And then the river too would have the space and the time to breathe and meander gracefully, following its eternal natural rhythm as she has been doing till date!

## About the author

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*The article 'An Alternative Perspective: Sabarmati Riverfront Development' has been published in LA, Journal of Landscape Architecture.*

[1] Trying to be 'sustainable' & 'global': Sabarmati riverfront development project