

Living with Water

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In East Libya in September 2023, two dams burst and flooded low-lying areas in Derna, killing thousands of people. The tragedy has given a painful twist to the idea of living with water and to the preface I was planning to write for this volume. Yes, water is the elixir of life, but water can also bring death and destruction, and the rapid pace of urbanization coupled with the growing uncertainty of climate change means that we must be sensitive to how we live with water. All our actions, whether remodelling riverfronts in the name of modernization, covering ancient water tanks or reclaiming coastal land for malls, flyovers, bridges and housing societies, will have consequences, especially for the poor and marginalized, whose lives are shaped by the intersection of land and water.

All over the world, people have an intimate, if varied, relationship with water. That relationship may be embodied in the river running through their city, in an ancient stepwell, aqueduct, or a rainwater-harvesting system. It might be the ocean or seafront with waves quietly lapping the shores. Whether water is a source of livelihood, as it is for fishing communities and farmers, or is a place for quiet reflection or for recreation, water has many meanings for all of us. Understanding where our water comes from and where it goes, like the ebb and flow of our tides, is critical for planning water-sensitive futures. Some children will unthinkingly open a tap to brush their teeth or have a shower, while others may walk with their mothers or siblings to fetch water from distant places, and others may stay at home missing school to look after the young ones – all these actions, whether they involve work or education, are shaped by access to water. How far, how little, how much, what quality....

When I spoke about the Living Waters Museum at the Watershed Development Center, up in the Catskill Mountains in the state of New York last year, a little girl asked me, “Why do women in India carry water on their heads over so many dusty miles? Who tells them to do that?” I found myself, with some help from the girl’s grandmother, explaining how access to water intersects with gender roles, rights and responsibilities, with class, caste, age, ability, race and many other dimensions of our social identity. Water is not a free resource – it can never be, particularly for those facing discrimination in their everyday lives around water. A poor woman once told me, “Drought lives in our stomachs,” as she tried to fill her jerrycan from a watering hole.

Building a water-secure world means understanding not only the inequality that determines how we live with water, but learning about our fluid past, whether it is the built environment, or the rituals and practices that have been the foundation for our water values. A new civilization ethics concerning water is crucial to a more sustainable and just water future, especially for our children. This is

at the core of the work we do through collaborative partnerships at the Living Waters Museum, a digital archive using the power of storytelling and interactive tools to curate visual narratives about India's rich water heritage. *Blue Papers* represents a platform where we can learn about traditional water practices and the results of past developments and we can appreciate the work of those researchers and practitioners who manage to bridge water management and cultural values.