

the gandi nali: an equalising force



An old-fashioned wide storm drain



Debris filled end of the same wide drain



The proverbial gandi naali



Brand new slabs fall into the drain. Note, that there is absolutely no margin to support the slabs on one end

The more I ponder over the issue of urban designing, the more I realise the intrinsic relationship between structure and movement. Within organised living, it is structure that determines the freedom and fluidity of movement. Therefore, it bears remembering that freedom cannot be taken for granted as it can be wilfully permitted, facilitated or obstructed. The various elements that need to freely move through our

POWER OF SEEING

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of natural elements needs to be more seriously considered in city-making, because they constitute the real 'live' components: the complexion of our streets changes daily because of them, sometimes even drastically!

Drains have been part of organised living since the time of Mohenjo-daro. They were devised to channel excess water away from human dwellings, so that we could enjoy a comfortably dry existence. Even today, storm drains around our homes are there to keep our roads puddle-free. However innocuous they may seem, they constitute arteries of our city and form a labyrinthine network of drains and *nallahs* that finally empty out into bigger water bodies including our sacred rivers.

When making a drain, two things need to be kept in mind, a) the treatment of its inner surface and b) whether it is to be left open or covered, and if so, how? The open drain makes it easier to clean, even though it may invite trash; and the covered drain keeps it relatively trash free, plus can offer extra space for parking or any other purpose. The inner surface of the drain needs to be smooth and *pucca* so that it doesn't crumble upon itself, plus evenly sloped to allow easy funneling of water; and if the drain is to be covered, then the material and the design of the covering needs careful consideration. The construction of the drain will determine whether it invites trash or not, an ill-defined or crumbling drain running a higher risk of turning into a festering garbage dump.

As drains are flushed right against boundary walls, they may fall into the grey zone between the inside and outside, making it unclear if their upkeep is the responsibility of individual home owners or the government. There are many responsible individuals who take very good care of the drains outside their homes and their concern and care is laudable! But like one weak link compromises the strength of a chain, one single obstruction blocks the entire drain. To ensure that the drains run smooth and free, we need to connect with our neighbours in an organised manner. Irrespective of social standing, what needs to be recognised is that the drain ties us together into one common people. Thus, for the sake of healthy drains or arteries of our city, we first of all need to view ourselves as equal to our neighbours (or to be more precise, consider our neighbours as equal to us!). Be it just

urban spaces are not only vehicles, humans and animals, but also air, light and water. In fact, the movement



Caved-in drain slabs with sharp metal edges, hazard for motorists and pedestrians alike



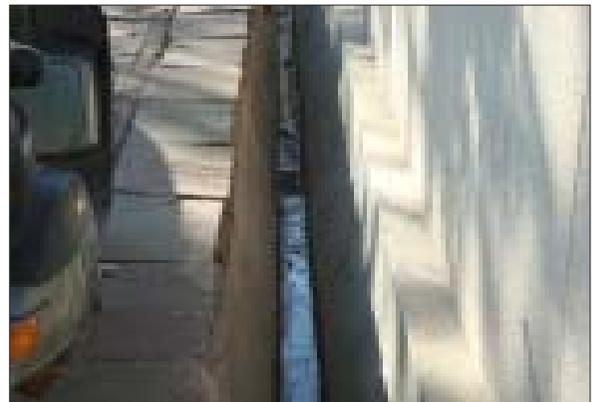
A festering drain with a missing cover



The littered Yamuna river bank

a few cooperative neighbours, or RWA's, or any other civic agency, what binds us in an organised manner is rules and policies that have been formed in consensus; the axiomatic wisdom of making a rule being that the more logical, reasonable and humane a rule, the firmer it will be! A logical rule may be able to exercise itself on the moral strength of its own soundness. If we don't follow rules, it is not because we are a defiant, unruly sort, but because most rules are illogical.

Just like random variance in plinth levels, the width of drains too varies from one section of the street to the other, thus making standardised treatment of the drain impossible. Over the last couple of years, many drains in south Delhi have been covered with decent looking concrete slabs, except that their placement has been characteristically shoddy and haphazard. For the most part, they are maladjusted and unevenly placed over surfaces that have not been prepared. With the result, they have either already fallen into the drains, or caved in, or are sitting awkwardly overlapping other slabs with sharp metallic edges sticking out, adding to the hazardous obstacles in the path of the pedestrian.



Water running in a well made drain with smooth inner edges and an effective slope

It is time for citizens to accept and register very squarely (without any sense of surprise or disdain) that most civic work in this city is imagined, executed and completed on paper. That is our reality at hand! As a people, we are characteristically neither callous nor uncaring. Most of us are just paralysed by the widespread illogicality behind the relentless chaos that surrounds us! One small step to becoming proactive and connected to our environment is to focus upon one element in the street that is close at hand and take responsibility for it. We might not be able to do anything about our rotting rivers leading to colossal ecological damage, but we can, as we must, come together to attend upon the drain to ensure its free movement. Because, what 'they' are doing to stagnate the Yamuna is not much different from what 'we' are doing to the drain outside our homes.



A metal drain cover on hinges: a good workable option



The Power of Seeing is a Studio Abhyas project initiated by dancer and yoga exponent Navtej Johar. It questions the absence of the human body as a central point of reference in urban design, making our cities inconvenient, unsafe and hazardous. Log onto

www.abhyastrust.org.