

**THE SABARMATI STORY:
MEMORY OF WATER AND NOTIONS OF PLACE**

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In semiotics, nature exists and gets transformed in four stages: stage zero being wilderness, one, interpreting, identifying, describing, nature two, material interpretation, translation, and production of nature, and three, virtual nature (as represented in the classical and formal arts for instance). A vernacular tradition may be understood as situated in stage one, wherein people convert the physical proximity to nature into a space replete with meaning and association. In a recent interdisciplinary workshop at CEPT University, India we explored the semiotically constructed notions of space and geography in villages on either side of the Sabarmati River in Gujarat.

The presence of the river has particular topographical and spatial impacts on the region, and a number myths and stories have been developed around its presence. What is interesting is that the river has been dammed, has now nearly dried and patterns of life and livelihood along its banks have significantly changed. The myths however remain, and have become ingrained in the settlement and landscape through built symbols such as temples, shrines and other religious iconography. These buildings take on the responsibility of being repositories of a vernacular world view constructed around associations with the river; they are the

memory of a water that is no longer there. This paper traces the myths of the place, their enshrinement through local institutions and buildings, and their persistence even when the essence of the myths i.e. the river is no longer present.

(This paper is based on and draws material from an interactive studies workshop titled 'Vocabulary of water' conducted by the authors at CEPT University, Ahmedabad, India in November 2009.)