

Fall of the Goddesses

*Hum bhool gaye unn nadiyon ko,
Delhi ko jisne pala tha,
Lucknow ko laakh sanwara tha
Hum bhool gaye unn nadiyon ko - Sabika Abbas Naqvi*

*We forgot those rivers,
The one that nurtured Delhi,
And the one that adorned Lucknow
We forgot those rivers*

Gomti is the river of my childhood while Yamuna is the river of my youth.

The project, Fall of the Goddesses, tells stories of two major rivers in northern India that were said to have originated from the celestial realms, but now flow in utter neglect and destruction. Yamuna and Gomti are two rivers that are still worshipped as Goddesses and have myths and folk songs dedicated to them. Stories with them, as the centre piece have been a part of our oral and visual traditions, since forever.

Different styles of Indian Miniature paintings have visually depicted events, battles, love stories, everyday life, and moments occurred along the banks of these rivers, portraying them as a witness to history, literature and mythology. Each community in India was devoted to these rivers. The birds found home in the various islands along their path. Lovers held hands, sun salutations were performed, flowers were floated and earthen lamps were lit. These rivers were loved. But now, both Yamuna and Gomti are victims of human ignorance and ecological crisis.

Untreated industrial and agricultural waste, sand mining, deforestation, landfills, rampant commercialisation of floodplains, overfishing, global warming and habitat destruction has led to the death of their waters. Their width in many places have been reduced to that of a drain. Excessive Land Reclamation to expand cities have destroyed these rivers biodiversity disrupting natural flow patterns, buffer zone, riverbank stability and water quality. The rivers which once used to provide water to millions of people in India are now undrinkable, engulfed in the clouds of chemical foam.

Have we forgotten the stories that tell us how these rivers were sent from the court of heaven to embrace the plains and give it life? When will we see the moonlight reflect on their surface again?

Fall of the Goddesses is an attempt to display the contrast of past glories of Yamuna and Gomti through mythology and folklore, their destruction in today's time due to the ecological destruction, and the human species's tendency to exploit these waters. Using interdisciplinary

methods like contemporary digital photography and Indian miniature painting styles like Mughal, Awadhi, Pahadi and Kangra, the work seeks to provoke contemplation on the delicate balance between our past adoration for these rivers and our present role in their perilous decline.

The sweeping rearrangement of both the natural (recorded) and the imagination (painted) in the project provides a perspective on the reciprocal relationship between ecological crisis and artistic production that emerged from the interstices of aesthetic practices, theological economies, and widespread environmental transformation. In doing so, the shifting ecologies are reshaped not only focusing on agrarian and urban life but also the visual languages through which rivers, landscapes, and divinity were imagined, prayed and recorded.

Each artwork in the series carries a deliberate mark at the centre top of the composition, created by brushing, rubbing, or dropping water collected directly from the respective river onto the surface of the work, allowing the works to have a physical trace of the river's presence and an evidence of its contamination. The toxicity of the water reacts with the paint and ink, eroding and damaging the surface, allowing the river itself to inscribe its deteriorating condition onto the artwork. In this way, the works function not only as depictions of ecological and cultural decline, but also as physical embodiments of the river's deteriorating condition.

The work also reflects on the fractured legacy of miniature painting in the aftermath of the Partition of India in 1947. Mughal and Awadhi styles, particularly those centred around a Muslim identity, suffered severe decline in post-Partitioned India. While these traditions survived through museums and archives, many of these Muslim living practices and secular cultural communities were gradually neglected.

Additionally, *Fall of the Goddesses* is not only about environmental collapse. It is also about memory and remembrance. The project reflects on how these rivers once held together communities, beliefs, and histories that flowed beyond religious identities and intolerance in India. In remembering them, the project seeks to reclaim the cultural and spiritual worlds that once flourished along their banks, challenging the realities of contemporary Indian society, where religious division and hate have become increasingly prominent.