Mapping the Ganga

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In 2005, with a camera and hand-held GPS unit, Anthony Acciavatti, adjunct assistant professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, left New York City to map the Ganga. During his expeditions into the mountains and plains, he began recording the cycles of the monsoon and dynamism of the Ganga river.

“In 2004, I finished my undergraduate studies at the Rhode Island School of Design and I knew I wanted to devote myself to study a major river. Whatever little I could gather about the river intrigued me. It is one of the world’s most densely populated river basins, agriculturally productive, and undergoes radical changes every year with the arrival of the south-west monsoon.”

“I wanted to understand how people lived in this region and how they incorporated the dynamism of the monsoons into their daily lives. Much to my surprise. I could not find any maps. The paucity of maps fuelled my curiosity and led me to apply for a Fulbright Fellowship to India. With no maps and few satellite images for reference. I was forced to travel across the basin by foot, boat and car,” he adds.

Acciavatti’s research adds to the efforts underway to address some of the most pressing questions about the Ganga, Nullahs are the most common means that wastewater and other pollutants enter the Ganga stream. “My work shows how these nullahs fluctuate with the monsoons and how new, soft-infrastructures like wetlands might be developed to deal with wastewater, “he adds. He further says, “Given the erratic electric supply, it makes sense to build infrastructures that are not dependent on non-stop access to electricity. I also worked on how the rhythms of the monsoons shape the lives of farmers and urbanites alike. My research also shows the connections between groundwater and river water as well as between roadways and railways.”

He further says, “After my journey into the Himalayas, I found three things: first, just following the path of the Ganga and studying the towns and cities along its edges were not enough. Second,. The connections between the monsoons, flow of the Ganga, and groundwater were all interrelated. Third, I drew large swathes to study portions of the basin in greater detail and compare and contrast these areas with one another.”