

**Mumbai
Water
Narratives**

Dear Mumbai,

We go back to a time when you were a cluster of islands and me a fluid entity encircling you from all sides. We were connected through mudflats and beaches and the fishing communities that lived on the coast.

I provided a doorway to your islands for numerous ships bringing in voyagers, traders and invaders. You soon transformed into an important port and so did my shoreline as land was reclaimed to connect the islands.

Travellers and lovers, tired office-goers and lonely retirees, families and friends all seek out the solace of a quiet evening at my shore, along beaches or promenades or on the fort ramparts that line the coast, watching sunsets and absorbing the sounds of my waves crashing along rocky edges.

However, over time, my pristine waters have turned murky and the corals and marine life I nurture are destroyed by the oils, chemical and plastic pollution that is ejected into my waters.

As I cradle you in my embrace, I often reminisce over our inseparable connection and wonder, in today's fast changing world, what the future has in store for us...

Yours,
The Arabian Sea



To,

Text by : Miraz Ansari | Image by : Vanessa Lobo



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Dear Mumbai,

I took form as a river aeons ago at the top of a hill in the thick of a forest and meandered through the island for miles before emptying myself into the Arabian Sea. I belong to the island of Salsette. I have witnessed the history of many kingdoms and evolved into a part of the megacity called Mumbai that we know today.

I quenched the thirst of those who settled along my banks and fed crops that grew alongside. But as my environs changed from natural to inhabited to over-populated, my identity transformed from a river into that of a filthy nala, a sewer to take away the excesses of the city, its homes and industries into the sea.

Today, most Mumbaikars don't know about my existence. Those who do, often forcefully change my natural course, confine my boundaries and turn their backs to me.

And yet, I exist, ever ready to forgive and go back to my natural form with a little love and care. For I believe that someday the city will recognise me as its integral part and reinstate me back to my original glory.

Dear Mumbai, I will wait for that day.

Yours,
Dahisar River



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari

Image by : Aslam Saifyad



Mumbai
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Narratives

Dear Mumbai,

I am the city vigilante, a cushion of velvety green providing a natural defence to your coast. We have coexisted for millennia as a group of islands protected by a fringe of humble mangroves.

My presence in the city is discreet and hence I am often ignored or misunderstood. Few know that I am a coastal ecosystem with a rich biodiversity, a nutrient rich breeding ground for fish, crabs, molluscs and sea turtles, a home for migratory birds. I also function as a carbon sink and a source of livelihood to local fishermen. My most important role to the city however, is that of a coastal barrier against flooding, which is a constant threat today due to climate change.

My existence is often threatened by dumping of debris and illegal building activities. My extents are diminishing due to the infrastructure mega-projects in the city. We could be heading to a time when I completely vanish from your coastline, leaving the city vulnerable to natural disasters. Till then, I stand guard, my roots wrapped in plastic waste, my waters reduced to sludge.

My vigil for my city continues...

Yours,
Mumbai Mangroves



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari

Image by : Copalis



Dear Mumbai,

I travel long distances to reach you (over 150 km) cutting through villages, hamlets and natural habitats. The inhabitants of this villages watch silently as I carry in my cavernous belly a resource more precious than roti, kapda aur makaan; a resource that is rightfully theirs but is taken away to fulfil the insatiable thirst of this city and its water supply needs..

I was first laid out around 1860 by the British connecting to a lake that was much closer and a requirement that was significantly smaller. And yet, as Mumbai grew in space and numbers, my branches grew as I reached out ravenously to far off water sources.

Everyday, as I cut across the city's length, I silently witness the raging battle between enormous waste and colossal want for this life-sustaining resource. With over half of its inhabitants living without adequate access to water, I blame myself for failing the masses..

But today, I ask you dear Mumbai, am I the only one to blame?

- The Pipelines of Mumbai



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari

Image by : Mohammed Esa Shaikh



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Dear Mumbai,

Do you remember the time when salt was a much sought-after commodity for trade and exchange? From the Portuguese to the Marathas and then the British, all had a keen interest in your salt pans. My vast swathes of low lying land are located in the flood plains of the islands and envelope the coast like a ribbon of white fabric.

Do you remember the historic Salt March in 1930 and the vital role you and I played in this event? The satyagrahis faced lathi charges and arrests but managed to make a huge dent in the British Raj. Even today, there are communities engaged in livelihoods in my vast plains, extracting salt from the pans in the wee hours of the morning in order to avoid the heat, humming folk songs along the way.

Do you know that a large part of my land is being eyed for development? Most of us don't know that salt pans provide the last frontier to floods because of their enormous water carrying capacity. I am also home to several bird and insect species that thrive in my saline environment. If I cease to exist, the environmental issues for the city will compound.

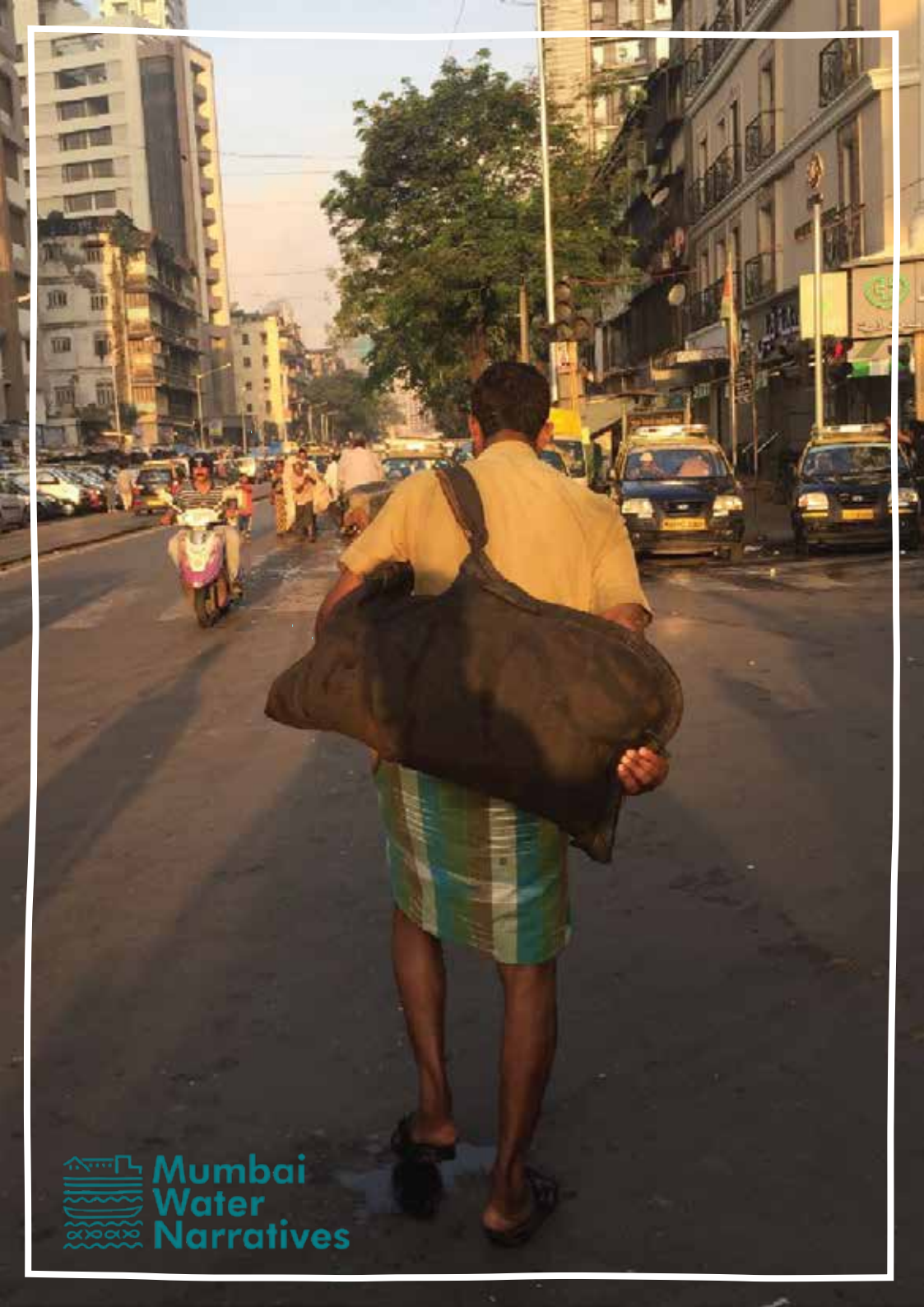
Do you worry? Well, I do.

Yours,
Dahisar Saltpans



To,

Text by : Miraz Ansari | Image by : Mohammed Esa Shaikh



Dear Water,

It's a hot, sultry afternoon. You and I have been trudging up and down the bazaars and mohallas around Mohammad Ali Road all morning. I stop to rest my feet outside the Minara Masjid. This heavy water-carrier, the mashaq which I have filled from the Kalbadevi Baoli, is gnawing away at my tired shoulder. Finally, a customer stops by and you quench his thirst, musky and sweetish in flavour, typical to that from a goatskin mashaq.

Not many remember the bhishtis anymore, we, who derive our name from the word bahisht or paradise. Even fewer know of the role we played as water-carriers in the British Raj, as we quenched the thirst of millions during wars, construction projects and in public spaces, without physical contact with the customers.

Today, our function has been taken over by water tanks, bottled water and other beverages. And our role in the city is disappearing as are our meagre earnings. We are probably the last generation of bhishtis but I wonder that with the growing water needs and depleting resources, will we re-emerge as a needed entity in the cities of the future?

Yours,
A Bhistee



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari

Image by : Mohammed Esa Shaikh



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My dear friend Water,

You and I are intertwined by the simple act of cleansing. For you, cleansing is an inherent quality; to me it is a means of livelihood and life. I and thousands like me in the Dhobi Ghat wash scores of pieces of clothing and linen for hotels, hospitals and homes every single day.

Our relationship with each other is intimate. From the wee hours of the morning to late in the night, you are central to this ritual of cleansing as it continues with clockwork precision 365 days a year. I spend long hours immersed in soapy water, flogging, brushing and rinsing piles of garments in the largest open air laundromat in the world. And as I relax my tired limbs after a warm bath at the end of the day I often wonder what tomorrow brings.

Nestled in the central part of the city, our microcosm of work and stay is often eyed as a potential for development. Tempting though it sounds, I wonder how our livelihoods will survive without the centuries old washing pens, flogging stones and the places to dry and iron clothes.

Will this rapidly changing city remember the relationship between the dhobi and his washing cubicle? I often wonder...

Yours,
A Dhobi



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari

Image by : Prak Chorge



Dear Water,

We meet every day at my kiosk at the street corner; you, a block of ice and me the busy golawala. We are both loved by everyone. Hundreds hound my stall, drooling at the enticing thought of a sweet syrupy icy treat quenching their thirst on a hot day.

A brazen riot of colours lines my counter as I create magic out of a simple block of ice as it is crushed and shaped around a stick and drenched in a medley of mouth-watering colourful sugary flavours. You are every child's fantasy and me, the conjurer of these fantasies into reality. You and I make a fine team indeed..

Why then, dear water, do you disappear from my life the moment I shut shop and return to my shanty after work? Why do I have to chase you at the common tap down the narrow lane outside my room where you appear in spurts at odd hours of the night? Why do I struggle every day for a few buckets of water that I need for my survival and daily needs?

In this city where we all come to realise our dreams and fulfil other's fantasies, when will adequate, clean water become a reality to all?

Yours,
An Ice golawala



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari
Image by : Mehvish Sayed



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Dear Water,

My earliest childhood memory is of standing along your coast watching my father sail into your folds with fishing nets, baits, food and water to last through the trip. How I yearned to go with him as I stood at the edge of the sea, waves lapping at my calves, the sand wriggling under my feet. I knew even then that I belonged not to the land but to the sea. My true home was in your embrace, Sailing into your depths, breathing in the sharp salty air, braving rain and sun alike, swaying to the rhythm of your movement. The land was merely a place to pause, to give back to others your abundant gifts of clams and shells, fish and other fruits of the sea.

The Coast and its civilizations brings with it its own complex mechanisms. Its only when I leave the shores behind to ride every wave you throw up, do I feel like I have found myself - me, the king of waters. To your kingdom I belong.

Yours,
A Koli



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari
Image by : Minaz Ansari



Mumbai
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Dear River,

I live in your embrace, unseen by the dazzle of the rest of Mumbai City. Your basin is my humble home which I share with caterpillars and crabs, termites and snakes, deer and leopards. I grew up bathing, fishing, playing in your waters, diving down gushing waterfalls in the monsoons. I learnt how to make colours from the bright rocks in your bed and painted your stories on the walls of my home.

You are integral to my life. The vegetables I grow in my wadi, the fish I catch in your streams and the waters that I fill in shiny metal pots are all vital to my sustenance. I may not worship you through rituals and offerings but I treat you like a sacred entity by keeping you clean and preventing you from deterioration.

Your existence brought my ancestors into your fold centuries before Mumbai came into being. And yet, today, you and I are both invisible to the city. If at all, you are seen as a nala and me as an encroacher...

It's time someone heard our story - the story of a river that is home to many lives and a community that cradles along its banks.

Yours,
A Warli



To,

Text by : Minaz Ansari
Image by : Aslam Saiyad