

Call for Papers

International Conference on River Islands Redefining the Anthropocene October 16-17, 2023 Ashoka University, Haryana, India

Recent years have seen a repositioning in the focus of river research towards a deeper understanding the diverse, humanised, dynamic and muddy worlds of river islands existing within the rivers. Social science disciplines such as geography, anthropology and history have been instrumental in initiating the shift presenting these islands as integral part of what is broadly described as “social nature” (Castree and Braun 2001). This conference, perhaps the first of its kind, is an attempt to bring together river islands scholars and practitioners from around the world to discuss various important issues concerning these riverine ecologies and explore pathways for future research.

River islands are relatively small, often transient pieces of land that exist between the banks of rivers. They are found in most large river systems in the world, and abound in the Himalayan Rivers in South Asia where they are known variously as *char*, *chaponi*, *baet*, and *diara* among others. They present “hybrid [geographies] ... neither fully land nor entirely water ... [representing] the fluid and complex worlds that lie within the rivers” (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013: x). Put differently, these are “fluidscapes” (Mukherjee and Ghosh 2020), or “liminal spaces” (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013: 14), “constantly adapting to the changing courses and configurations (Baruah 2022: 149). Although generally they are the products of both fluvial dynamics and human interventions, some river islands also refer to catastrophic tectonic events in their ancestry. These are the quintessential hybrid water/lands that defy, and blur, conventional notions of borders and territorialities (Sur 2021).

Although river islands are home to millions of people everywhere, in South Asia the char-dwellers, or choruas (or chouras), are people who are both economically and socially on the margins. A sizable section of this population also consists of migrants and refugees, people who are constantly on the move “like the drifting grains of sand” (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2007) or sedentarised at the risk of illegitimacy (Chakraborty 2009) despite the significant numbers living in these islands.

The conference is founded on the growing evidence that the unique hydrotopias of river islands are on the brink of fundamental changes in the Anthropocene. Although people in river islands have always lived with – and adjusted to – environmental changes and disasters, today they are encountering the unknown and unpredictable changes that the Anthropocene poses. Small Pacific island nations, despite their small population sizes, are under the microscope of the global Climate Change research community, yet river islands with millions depending on them continue to experience an invisibility as the “slow disasters” (Baruah 2022) continue to devastate them, rendering choruas homeless and landless, and uprooting them from their traditional livelihoods.

Yet char-dwellers are not mere victims of environmental disasters. Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta’s (2013) phrase “dancing with the river” perhaps is an apt description of life on chars, except that sometimes this dance gets arrhythmic due to the crises discussed above. Khan (2022: 9) talks about a “chaura mode of existence” to highlight the dynamic relations that the

chauras/choruas develop with moving lands, and an environment that is constantly shifting. Baruah (2022: 149) calls for a “deep reflection on the natural history of these islandscapes and envisioning life in these places accordingly.” The task is, following Stratford et al. (2023: 1268), to reconsider the Anthropocene in a way that refuses to “(re)produce modes of relating with islanders that seem and are colonizing,” thereby reiterating the fact that islands are “not mere objects and islanders are not powerless victims” (ibid: 1258). This conference will articulate a new “epochal epistemology of islands” (ibid: 1268) that fully enables the restitution of their historical and local specificities in terms that are provided by islanders first and foremost.

The proposed two-day conference is organized by the departments of Sociology and Anthropology and Environmental Studies at Ashoka University, in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur, and The Australian National University. It is aimed at assembling the river island narratives, discussing and critically interrogating concepts and empirics, and enabling a meaningful conversation between early career researchers and senior, established scholars in the domain. The immediate output will be a special issue/section on river islands in an international, peer-reviewed journal that will include six to eight selected conference papers, with co-authorship being encouraged between junior and senior scholars (also adhering to gender inclusion and geographical representation principles).

The long-term goal however is to initiate a larger, more systematic conversation on river islands, across the global North and South, and promote interdisciplinary scholarly and action research on these hybrid ecologies through global partnership, facilitating cross-sectoral dialogues and collaborations.

Session Themes:

1. Islands, Anthropocene and decoloniality
2. Islands, place-making, and the everyday
3. Infrastructure, “development,” and sustainability of river islands
4. Islands as spaces of disaster and vulnerability
5. Island (id)entities along shifting times
6. Islands in relations: rethinking “islandness” in a globalized world

Please submit your abstract (between 350-500 words) by **July 25**, and the full paper by **Sep 30**. You can submit your abstract as well as write to us for any further query at: riverislandsconference@ashoka.edu.in

The venue for the conference is Ashoka University campus, Sonapat, Haryana (<https://www.ashoka.edu.in/contact-us/>). **Participants are expected to arrive on Sunday, Oct 15, and leave by late-afternoon, Oct 17.** A conference dinner will be hosted in Delhi on Oct 15, details of which will be communicated in due course. Due to limited funding, Ashoka will not be able to pay for your airfare (except in special cases). However, we will take care of your local transportations, accommodations, and all meals, including the conference dinner.

Works cited

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Conference Organizers

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