

# Najafgarh – Wetland or Wasteland?

In this chapter from *Nature Conservation in the New Economy*, Neha Sinha tries to unravel the curious conservation case of the Najafgarh drain in the National Capital Region

By Neha Sinha

In the winter of 2011, ecologist Sumit Dookia visited a place called Najafgarh drain. The name of the area itself is an oddity: the word ‘drain’ suggests sewage, rot, and an absence of fecundity. But what Dookia found surprised him. The Najafgarh ‘drain’ was an old waterbody, about 51 kilometres long, which flows through Delhi and Haryana. The area was teeming with birdlife, and mammals were spotted utilising it. The Najafgarh drain itself comes from something usually considered more respectable than a drain—a river, the Sahibi River. The Delhi government notes that the Najafgarh area has flooded several times, as the channel carries water from the Sahibi River. It also observes that improved drainage in Haryana has led to more water entering Delhi through this drain.

As Dookia and his students started exploring the area, they noted hundreds of greater flamingos, migratory ruffs, flocks of black-winged stilts, and several other water birds. Immediately, a chord was struck: the area, fairly close to Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, was ripe to be adopted as a research site and a source for exploring local avian biodiversity.

While the Najafgarh wetland is called a ‘drain’, its identity as a biodiverse site—which includes a wetland or *Jheel* (lake)—belies both its name and this very identity. This mirrors a curious truth that surrounds wetlands in India:

although many wetlands survive in the country, they have not been notified, identified or named in public record as wetlands or in any similar terms. These habitats exist as ‘drains’, or are seen as land rather than ‘wetland’, or just as sources of water rather than ecological systems in their own right (Sinha 2016). Dwarka was made specifically to solve the housing crunch in Delhi. Differentiated from other housing projects in the National Capital Region (NCR), Dwarka was planned as a mini-city within the Delhi metropolis. Despite being located in a somewhat remote corner of West Delhi, this sub-city’s size, scale, and location within the capital have made it a real estate favourite. Within Dwarka, the L Zone is yet to be converted into housing. On property sites like MagicBricks and 99acres, Dwarka’s L Zone is advertised as having the cheapest land. The land here is cheap because the area is yet to be fully colonised; this Zone is the shadow sub-city waiting to rise from its wetland and surrounding precincts.

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Property advertisements say that most of the L Zone flats and residences will be completed between 2019 and 2021, and buyers are encouraged to invest in the area. Despite an ongoing property slump, it is understood that this Zone will be under brick and mortar soon. But for ecologists, nature enthusiasts and birdwatchers, the Najafgarh drain and its catchment deserve protection from land-use conversion. Among these competing interests, whose needs would be privileged?

The larger question is an even more basic one: while this drain clearly carries water and hosts waterfowl, is it a ‘wetland’?

### **Wetlands, Wastelands and Nullahs**

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) describes the Najafgarh drain in the following words: ‘It [The Najafgarh drain] is one of the very old drains which emanates from Rajasthan/Haryana as a rivulet, where phased improvements have been carried out over the years. The capacity of the drain is about 3,000–8,000 cusec in different segments, with very gentle gradient’ (DDA 2007).

In the larger policy framework, India’s Wetland Rules, 2017 define wetlands as such:

‘Wetland’ means an area of marsh, fen, peatland or water; whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters, but does not include river channels, paddy fields, human-made water bodies/tanks specifically constructed for drinking water purposes and structures specifically constructed for aquaculture, salt production, recreation and irrigation purposes (Wetland Rules 2017).

While the definition appears comprehensive, it leaves out at least two forms of inland water—flowing rivers and drains such as the Najafgarh drain.

The storm-water drain, also descriptively called the ‘*ganda naala*’ (lit. dirty drain) has had a chequered and unwelcome reception in city planning. For the 2010 Commonwealth Games, parts of the Barapullah drain were covered to create a road for delegates. The attitude towards the *ganda naala* has been to neglect its ecological history as well as its importance (Baviskar 2013). The term ‘*ganda naala*’ is often used to give directions in India—and appears to have been accepted as a feature in several cities—but there is little reflection on how the *ganda naala* came to be. In upmarket Defence Colony in South Delhi, the ‘dirty’ Barapullah drain was covered to create parking lots, and a park and seating area before the high-profile Commonwealth Games. For all purposes, it seems that the drain can only offer recreation when it does *not* exist. The Najafgarh drain has also been part of a cover-up: the Delhi government spent several crores in building walls around the drain in Wazirabad. This was done to ‘prevent people from throwing trash and tyres into the drain’. It is not entirely clear whether this was also to protect the city from the perceived eye-sore that is the drain, or to protect the drain itself from the city.

And this is a vicious cycle. Nearly every year the local press reports on the bickering among the authorities over desilting drains in Delhi. Before monsoon, the drains are to be desilted and cleaned, but this is usually not done on time. As a result, drains get blocked, breed mosquitoes, and generally emanate an unwholesome look, encouraging people to throw more garbage into them. Historic storm water channels have become, for most purposes in Delhi, part of a present that the city does not seem to want. Yet a small group of conservationists have been trying to protect storm water drains in the city. For them, storm water drains are part of the city's ecological history and future. Many argue that the encroachment of and engineering interventions in storm water drains, exacerbate flooding, among other problems. A recent order by the National Green Tribunal specified that storm water channels should not be covered.

But this has not deterred the Delhi government from continuing planning the covering of a chunk of the Najafgarh drain for a road, just like on the Barapullah drain. A 26 kilometre road, covering Kakrola to Wazirabad, is planned on the drain. A feasibility study commissioned by the Public Works Department (PWD)—for a major portion of the stretch—has already been carried out.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, at least part of the problem comes from the fact that India's Wetland Rules clearly leave out flowing water channels; this includes drains and rivers.

By leaving out rivers and storm water channels, the Rules seem to hint that these water bodies need management, but not biological conservation. Within these two categorisations of waterbodies too, a clear hierarchy is evident. If rivers contain spectacular biodiversity and are repositories of our history and culture, then drains seem to be their smelly, poor, ragtag cousins. We have to ask ourselves—would we privilege storm water channels more if they were called rivers? And do rivers remain 'rivers' when decimated by pollution, or do they become drains in our understanding and lexicon?

There have been pleas for bringing rivers into the ambit of the Wetland Rules, and thus, provide them with institutional and biological conservation. In the case of drains, the issue is even more complex, and less high-profile. Delhi has historically had many storm water channels, which have slowly become a trundling treacle of sludge and sewage. Storing and carrying rain water is an environmental service, but as the city grows, this particular 'service' is hardly appreciated. The 2015 floods in Chennai, thought to be exacerbated because of the covering of the Buckingham canal, showed that such services can no longer be ignored.

Clearly, streams and drains like Najafgarh would not be protected under the Wetland Rules, even though certain portions (such as lakes and jheels) may fulfil the wetland 'criteria' under current legislation. In the case of drains like Najafgarh, streams that historically carried storm water or river water have been converted to sewage channels all over India. The conversion from 'stream' to 'drain' has been rapid, and now there are moves to cover these drains. Covering up a drain is like washing hands off the issue, and pretending that the waterbody does not exist.

Is there a better understanding of wetlands, their services and peculiarities in other government dossiers apart from the Wetland Rules?

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