Hydraulic City
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The floods of 2005 drew unprecedented attention to the flows and future of the Mithi River. Originating in Borivali National Park, the Mithi River releases its waters into Mahim Bay.¹ But this has not always been the case. In their history of the city’s estuarine landscape designers, Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha (2009) detail how a seasonal surface flow was consolidated as a river through practices of cartographic representation on the one hand, and infrastructure projects (such as railways and dams) on the other (see map 1). This river, the Mithi River, is, in the absence of sewerage works, the primary drainage system for many of the area’s industries and homes. Over the last few decades, there have been several conversations in urban government to “clean up” the Mithi.

However, in 2008 state officials saw in the toxic mixes of the Mithi not a problem of waste and contamination but an opportunity. Rather than build new sewage infrastructure, the state government has argued that the Mithi is not just a river but also a drain, and as such deserving of federal urban infrastructure funding. The application for funding confused the Union (Federal) Finance Ministry, which began to ask questions of the state government. The Hindustan Times carried the story:

A call from the Union Finance Ministry on Saturday left officials in the state secretariat puzzled. The ministry wanted to know whether the Mithi, blamed for much of the 26/7 [flood] damage, was a river or a drain. . . .

“Finance Ministry officials said that if the Mithi was a river, then it could not be funded as an urban renewal project and the state may have to look for funding under some other scheme,” said a [state] official on condition of anonymity.

State officials then had to convince the Finance Ministry that the Mithi was a 14.7-km river, but one which carried both sewage and storm water discharge to the sea. Hence, they argued, it could be classified as
an urban renewal project. (“Is Mithi a River or a Drain, Asks Centre,”

*Hindustan Times*, September 3, 2007)

Their claim, however, was not convincing to the central government, which argued that environmental improvement was not in the mandate of the urban renewal mission. It argued that the Mithi was not urban “infrastructure” but “environment,” and as such, urban renewal funds could not be used to improve it.

The incident demonstrates how the words we use to name water or any other resource matter. The different names we have for water do, or do not, make it amenable certain kinds of human interventions. “By turning names into things,” Eric Wolf reminds us, “we create models of reality, targets for development and war” (1982, 6). The controversy demonstrates how the question of whether the Mithi was called a river or drain was of tremendous consequence for the agency that could be called on to be responsible for its management. By calling the Mithi a drain, the state government sought to call for a set of interventions that would make the Mithi a sewer.

The controversy also begets the question: what is a river? The answer is far from clear (see Mathur and Da Cunha 2001). The only thing we do know is that Mithi’s existence as a river cannot be extricated from the people who make and remake Bombay a city. Over the last four hundred years, the form of the Mithi has been materially, spatially, and symbolically intertwined with the form of the city.