Hydraulic City
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Faithfuls flocked by the dozens to the Mahim creek on Friday to sip “sweet” water. Only nobody stopped to think twice before cupping his hands to drink the unfiltered water. As police tried to control the crowd thronging the beach . . . reason seemed to take a backseat.

The believers wouldn’t have cared to listen at that moment of mass hysteria that the salty taste of the seawater across India’s coastline naturally drops during the monsoon due to an inflow of freshwater from the Mithi River, especially at low tide. But who can blame the common folk when Mayor Datta Dalvi himself exulted “Chamatkar ho gaya (It’s a miracle).” “Mahim creek is not fit to even bathe in,” Rakesh Kumar, head, National Environmental and Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) zonal office, told HT. “It’s always Mumbai’s most polluted creek in our regular test results.” . . .

The believers—Muslim, Hindu and Christian—would have none of it. They drank the scum-laced water, praised the lord—and carried on the strangest beach party that Mumbai’s ever seen. Crowds grew through the night, leading to late-night traffic jams and police reinforcement. The enterprising among the crowds even bottled and sold the murky water. “This is like Ganga jal. We will store it at home and purify the house with it,” said Santacruz resident Mahadev Gujar. By Saturday morning, the water was even “curing” the sick. Asim, a teenager from Rabali in Thane, claimed he got immediate relief from his back pain after drinking a mouthful of water. —“Faithfuls Gulp Mahim’s Mithi Water,” Hindustan Times, August 19, 2006

One year after the most dreadful floods in the city’s history, Mumbai’s water was again in its news. The summer prior, in July 2005, city residents had tried for days to get out of the flooding Mithi River, and to get the flooding river out of their homes. Hundreds died in the effort. A year later, as this article in the Hindustan Times illustrates, people were trying to get in to the river at Mahim Creek. They headed toward Mahim’s beaches in droves to partake of water’s magical qualities. “Faithfuls,” the police, journalists, friends, political leaders, and scientists each created their own story with these waters. Some flocked to the Mithi and, drinking its water, insisted their afflictions were cured. Scientists rushed to the Mithi to try and explain why it suddenly
turned sweet. The police rushed to the Mithi to maintain public order, prevent drownings, and, in all likelihood, behold the spectacle of believers on the beach. Together, on the banks of where the river-creek-sewer meets the sea, the scientists, police, and publics experienced a liquid material that was simultaneously sewage, sea, a miracle, a health risk, a health cure, a business opportunity, evening entertainment, and a law and order problem.

As it nourishes both the imagination and the body, water is a strange, political, poetic material that is fundamental not only to the formation of human bodies but also to the ways in which we make meaning in the world (Strang 2004). Constituting over two-thirds of the earth’s surface, half of our body weight, and 70 percent of our brain, it is perhaps not surprising that water is saturated with layers of meaning and vitality. Indeed, the world over, water is a special material through which we can study the relations between politics, ecology, and social life. On that balmy night in August, water provided a surface for incommensurable regimes of value to condense in the same place and time, to contest and compete in cosmological battles of knowledge and belief, power and meaning, health and vitality.

Despite focusing on a certain kind of water—the kind that comes through city pipes—my research for this book was constantly interrupted by the effects and affects of different kinds of water in the city: rainstorms and floods canceled city trains and with them, my interviews; monsoons reclaimed the city's coastline; perennial springs disrupted carefully crafted narratives of scarcity in the settlements; and displacements of and by the river Mithi claimed both life and governmental attentions.

As residents encounter water in different times and places, they know water in multiple and incommensurable ways. They recognize that water simultaneously bears different qualities—not only in terms of its microbiology and total dissolved solids but also in its relation to religious ritual, its processes of production and circulation, and the kinds of modernity, purity, and citizenship it symbolizes and (often) materializes.

Despite the extraordinary efforts of city bureaucracies to make water predictable, legible, and boring, water remains enchanted. Its stories proliferate beyond the repertoires of states and their scientists. Water is never just H₂O. While scientists like Rakesh Kumar often have stories and facts about the water (e.g., its properties and purity), these explanations often are not the primary ways in which people know, see and understand water. Water carries meanings and symbols far in excess of its material substance. In its periodic
cycles of abundance and scarcity—of floods and drought (in whose productions humans participate)—water delivers life and death, dirt and purity, toxicity and vitality. Its potential to both nourish and poison bodies makes it a peculiar substance that is not only vital to persons but also a fickle arbiter of miracles, of memory, of myth, and of life.