



ARSENIC IN THE BENGAL DELTA

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Earthly poison is a research project focused on understanding territorial transformations at various scales that take place with the entanglement of environmental and political violence. The text, audio, video, image and data presented in the World of Matter project are from an ongoing research on large-scale arsenic poisoning in the Bengal Delta and its legal possibilities.

1972. Bangladesh is a new state emerging out of a national liberation war and a cyclone. Inspired by the Green Revolution, UNICEF undertook a major public health engineering project, drilling millions of hand pumps aimed at providing safe drinking water, and over subsequent years sinking private tube wells became normative practice. Although considered a major humanitarian success, it exposed a significant part of the population to ground water aquifers rich in arsenic. Several decades on, the slow environmental violence continues to unfold at a population level in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. The same state and humanitarian players implicated in its complex causality are now charged with the responsibility of dealing with its consequences. An earthly poison unleashed with a violent forensic history.

Arsenic in the groundwater of the Bengal delta is a spatial problem that can be addressed through both scale and intensities analogous to the ways in which arsenic moves, as well as its movements that are captured within the earth, the atmosphere and the human body. I have expanded the architectural concept of scale to include a number of definitions: geological scale in order to account for complex vertical and lateral spatial distribution, and when geological time meets human time; epidemiological scale ? the minute increments that run for as long as twenty years in which poison slowly enters the human body; and territorial scale.

The protagonists of this research are scientists, aid agencies, villagers, activists, NGOs and of course arsenic. By expanding a sense of scale to explore the worlds these characters occupy, this research traces the impact of arsenic through history, chemistry, geographic contexts, social issues, activism and law in order to question what kinds of legal responses are possible with a problem that is so complex, and when responsibility is so diffused. Towards this the research presents a short legal case study and the results of a set of water tests.

Cluster: Earth Poison

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