



DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

WATER AND LAND IN NORTH BIHAR
AN ONTOLOGY

BY

DR. LUISA CORTESI, (PH.D. YALE UNIVERSITY)
CORNELL UNIVERSITY

26 AUGUST 2019
11:00 AM
SEMINAR HALL

LAND AND WATER IN NORTH BIHAR: AN ONTOLOGY

Dr. Luisa Cortesi

Report written by
Himani Rathore and Sagarika Rao

Photography
Taniya Gill

On 26th August 2019, the Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi hosted Dr. Luisa Cortesi, a Yale University Ph.D. scholar and a Stanford H. Taylor Postdoctoral Fellow in Science and Technology Studies and Anthropology at Cornell University. Dr. Cortesi has been working in the northern districts of Bihar since 2007, in her pursuit for the environmental knowledge of disastrous waters. On this occasion she was presenting her work titled, “Water and Land in North Bihar: An Ontology.” Her work aims to highlight how people get to know a world that is difficult to live in and how this plurality of meaning intersects with structures of inequality.

Compartmentalised into three distinctive, yet mutually inclusive portions, Dr. Cortesi first focused on the theorising of embankments. The difficulties of the populace of North Bihar, she posits, are owed to the immense expanse of interlaced floodplains. Disastrous floods are frequent and highly damaging and have become more so with the extensive construction of embankments in the past few decades. Dr. Cortesi argues that in theory embankments are a technique of segregation, however, in practice water and soil are materially and ontologically intimate in these ecological conditions.



The idea of embankments resonates with the concept of fortification of cities with separation and protection (from pollution through admixture) being the main motives. The idea of dirt entering ‘pure’ liquid is culturally detested and is cross-culturally associated with women, vaginal fluid, etc. Embankments are designed to protect land (categorised as solid and soil) from violent, wild water. However, the consequences of these constructions are quite different in reality. Local inhabitants have on several occasions protested their construction;

elders quote it as “an attempt to tie the water.” Embankments impact the velocity of the water and the constitution of the riverbed, often resulting in a failure of control leading to water overflowing.

The following two sections revolved around what she referred to as the “cognitive intimacy” between land and water as well as the conclusive understanding of ontologies in general, respectively.

Dr. Cortesi claims that against the presupposed notion harboured by the embankment authorities of the land/soil and water being antagonistically distinct, the local ontology of her field of study rendered them both materially and conceptually untenable. The section entitled, 'Land and Water Cannot Be Named' threw light on the value of land in North Bihar, popularly known as the 'Land of Rivers' and by extension, that of embankments, being premised heavily on water and vice versa. For instance, the parameters of land assessment depend as much on land-use patterns as on its moisture retention capacity, availability of a reliable groundwater table, and most importantly, the river that deluges the plot as the natural source of drainage.



Similarly, the quality of water is determined on the basis of its colour which ranges from yellow to black and red. Stemming primarily from the dissolution or containment of soil particles as solutes in varying intensities, the colour also signifies the velocity as well as the taste of the river. This additional conception of soil as the solute in water not only contrasts it against the blue colour palette generally associated with the latter, but also elevates its understanding from being a mere solvent (comprising hydrogen and oxygen) to that of a solution.



The mutually inclusive understanding of the entities of land and water is further embodied in the cultural significance accorded to the goddess Kamala, a personification of Kamala which forms one of the many rivers that drain the region. She is revered not only to quench the thirst of the inhabitants but is also symbolically worshiped prior to any mechanical drilling of groundwater which in turn forms the greatest source of irrigation as well as drinking water. The techno-religious practice thus mentioned is believed to allow for the

separation of water from soil which are otherwise considered inseparable.

In the last section, Dr. Cortesi while positing the non-universality of ontologies mentions, ‘what appeared to me as water, appeared to my respondents as muddy; what I saw as a patch of solid land, appeared to them as retaining water underneath.’ This led her to describe 'ontology' as being

contingent, conflictual, sclerotic, deductive, and political. The contingency intrinsic to ontology often translates into a semiotic conflict arising out of belonging to contrasting ‘communities of practice’ or merely its sclerotic nature. Ontologies are rigid because while they are culturally formed and often understood in the context of the human sensorium, for instance our understanding of water depending on our senses, it ultimately depends on natural categories which are largely absolute. The widespread notion of water as being a colourless, odourless, and tasteless chemical substance, not taking into consideration the sensorium context, further renders ontology as deductive for according significance to the ideal type while disregarding other tokens. Her study suggests that ‘water’ as a term should be used as indexical instead of being disguised as a general term. Lastly, the political aspect of land, elaborated more in another article titled, “The muddy semiotics of mud,” talks of the ontology of powerful people being widely accepted while simultaneously overpowering that of the others.

The aforementioned characteristics associated with ontology are acknowledged by Dr. Cortesi as bearing the brunt of colonialism and imperialism which leads her to steer the study towards both post-humanist and neo-materialist implications. She challenges the perception that minority studies cannot contribute to theory and are bereft of depths of inquiries worth a philosophical pursuit while readily seeking to de-colonise the theoretical premise.

Owing to the nature of the research and the unique perspective that Dr. Cortesi provided, the audience was curious with questions. Upon being questioned on the politics behind the water problem, she highlights how the location and distribution of power collectively shape the assumptions of even a seemingly simple category/word – water. The idea of a distinct and distinguished ontology/community of practice of the people of north Bihar was also questioned by a scholar from the audience, to which she replied by elucidating the pluralities in this ontology and that even when amongst the inhabitants of the districts of northern Bihar, a single, unified, and defined way of meaning revolving around the idea of land and water could not be found. Conclusively, Dr. Cortesi posits that her aim has been to discuss knowledge not as content but as a process and the mechanism of knowing ‘why we know what we know.’

