

## **Song of the River: An Environmental History of the Middle Ganga Plain**

### **Vipul Singh**

At the Rachel Carson Center I will be working on a book project that explores the long-term history of people living along the river in the middle Ganga plain. Folk songs dedicated to river in the languages spoken in the region—Bhojpuri, Maithili, Magahi, Angika—extol the river as the lifeline of the people. My title recollects much of the epic sense that pervades the folk literature and the oral tradition in the region and at the same time tries to locate the long-term landscape transformation and cropping pattern changes that have been taking shape since medieval times. My proposition questions the colonial technical modernism that was centered on massive engineering projects such as construction of embankments and irrigation channels. I would argue that medieval people embraced a rather noninterfering and prudent approach in river management. To address how rivers and water were understood, I will draw on Persian and vernacular narrative sources. Contrary to this approach, the British colonial regime brought in the European model of river management that proved disastrous for the flood-dependent society of the mid-Ganga basin in the long run.

My project also attempts to highlight the changing nature of a river economy and tries to hypothesize the relationship between the economy and environmental history. Premodern evidence suggests that the Ganga did have the tendency to change its course temporarily in the mid-Ganga section, but it did not change much in premodern times to the extent that it could impact the cropping pattern and affect the economy in the region. Largely because of its stable character, a number of towns and settlements came up along the Ganga in ancient times, and they continued to flourish in medieval times as centers of political authority. Conversely, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the region became linked with the maritime economy and trade, and the center of commercial activities shifted from Ganga-Yamuna doab to the middle Ganga plain. After the British East India Company obtained land revenue rights to the region in 1765, it sought permanence in administrative and revenue policies, and to achieve this, it encouraged the construction of embankments and communication networks, especially railways parallel to the river. Using Patna, Bhagalpur, and Munger as case studies, my project explores the gradual decommonization of the river. In spite of the technical modernisms and various financial interests, which allowed huge projects to be underway, the benefits to the river society were diminished in the long run.