

Siddharth Menon, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Geography

(De)Constructing Concrete: Capital, Nature, and Infrastructure in Urbanizing India

In August 2018, the coastal south Indian State of Kerala received record rains, triggering a 100-year flood and accompanying landslides that caused tremendous losses to life and property. Subsequent investigations revealed the critical role that concrete-fueled urbanization in Kochi, the State's largest city, had played in creating and exacerbating the floods. Planning policies that prioritized urban economic growth had enabled the cementing of wetlands and floodplains for urban expansion. Rising demand for concrete had, in turn, accelerated unchecked sand dredging from local riverbeds and stone quarrying from surrounding mountains, preventing water from being absorbed by rivers and precipitating landslides. The social and ecological problems associated with concrete use are well known within sustainable development circles, but this has done nothing, until now, to diminish its popularity as a means of construction. The floods in Kerala, however, have heightened people's awareness of the destructive aspects of concrete. As such, this project will investigate the following question: why is concrete the embodiment of urbanization in developing cities and how is its dominance being challenged or reproduced in post-floods Kochi? To answer the question, I will conduct an ethnography of the construction of a typical concrete residential building in suburban Kochi. I argue that following concrete and its social and material entanglements on the construction site and beyond will reveal insights about its three major components: financial capital, construction labor, and sand. These insights will highlight how concrete's dominance as the materiality of urbanization is being maintained or disrupted in the aftermath of Kochi's floods.