

SARITA SUTRAKATHA

Riverine Cultures in Indian Narratives

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Edited by
ARZUMAN ARA



INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla

First published 2023

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ISBN: 978-93-82396-86-4

Published by

The Secretary

Indian Institute of Advanced Study

Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla-171005

Typeset at:

Sai Graphic Design, New Delhi

Printed at Dipi Fine Prints, New Delhi

Cover Photo: Boatman at Prayag Sangam.

Photo Credit: Arzuman Ara

To
PROF. KAILASH C. BARAL

Contents

<i>Foreword of the Director of IIAS</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1. Nature and Natural Phenomena in Enchanted and Disenchanted Worlds: From Religious World Views to Literary Freedoms	15
JIBU MATHEW GEORGE	
2. Riverine Trade in Ancient India: Revisiting Historical Texts	29
SANGHAMITRA RAI VERMAN	
3. Uncanny Indian Rivers in the British Mindset in Colonial India	47
SHAONA BARIK	
4. Rabindranath Tagore: Rivers and the Discourse of Power	71
SUBIR DHAR	
5. River Sutra: Poetics of River, Popular Culture and Bhupen Hazarika's River Songs	89
KAILASH C. BARAL	
6. The Floating Child in Indian Mythology	105
UMESH PATRA	

7. Anthropomorphism of Rivers in Folk Songs of Gaddis of Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh	121
SWETA AND ALKA LALHALL	
8. River Narratives and Tribal World View in the Khasi and Jaintia Folklore	135
I. AMENLA CHANGKIJA AND SURAJIT SEN	
9. Gods and Bazaars Across the River: Representation of the Ganges in Bengali Pilgrimage Narrative <i>Thirthamangal</i>	155
ARKADEB BHATTACHARYA	
10. On the Sail: Boatmen and Boat Journeys in Indian River Fiction	193
P. MURALIDHAR SHARMA	
11. River in the Migration Narratives of Assam	209
ARZUMAN ARA	
12. How does the River/Water Speak in the Partition Narratives of the Indian Subcontinent?	231
PRAVEEN MIRDHA	
13. Cosmopolitics: Reading the Riverine Stories of BVS Rama Rao's <i>Godavari Kathalu</i>	261
KOTTI SREE RAMESH & D. JYOTHIRMAI	
14. River of Plaintive Voices: Darker Sides of Modernity in Na. D'Souza's <i>Dweepa: the Island</i>	277
CHAND BASHA M.	
15. Ganga on the Celluloid: A Feminist Reading of Select Films	291
MALVIKA SHARAD	
<i>Biographical Notes</i>	307

Foreword

Nature has been of immense importance in the Indian collective cultural and creative psyche. Among all the objects of nature, river is the most revered one as a nurturer of life. Most of the names of the Indian rivers are gendered as female which linguistically reinforces the role of nurturer played by the rivers in the human life and civilization. Indian civilization grew and developed around rivers that gave rise to a robust representation of the rivers in literature and other creative media. Not only the religious texts, numerous folklores, fables, stories, fictions, travelogues, paintings, films — all have rivers represented in some form or the other. Rivers appear and are represented, not only as a nurturer of life, but also as passage to the afterworld signifying their intertwined relationship with man's worldview.

This volume *Sarita Sutrakatha: Riverine Cultures in Indian Narratives* is a commendable volume that brings together various studies surrounding the rivers of India and offers a critique of the riverine cultures of India. The unique feature of this book is that it does not bring in the much hyped ecocritical reading of the rivers, rather, it presents a composite study of the river cultures represented across genre and in different Indian bhasha literatures. As we are proud of our diverse languages and cultures, this volume gives glimpses of that diversity with a thread to bind all of us

together, that is the river sutra. Although river is the central trope of this book, but we also discover layers of history, politics, social relationships and above all man's eternal resilience spirit through reading the different chapters in this book. Moreover, this book is also a valuable contribution towards understanding our robust and rich literary cultures composed in many languages.

I have immense pleasure in writing the Foreword for this volume as I firmly believe that this book is going to be a valuable contribution for those who endeavour to understand Indian cultures and civilization.

DIRECTOR
Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla

Acknowledgements

Perhaps, I should express my gratitude first to the rivers of India for being there giving us such a wonderful eco-cultural milieu which helps us grow with a consciousness of a river sutra that binds the nation with unity and harmony. Giving special attention to the rivers of India, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies has been instrumental in organizing a special National Integration Seminar on “River in the Literary Traditions of India” in 2020 which was held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The deliberations of the seminar have paved the way to this book. I am grateful to Prof. Makarand Paranjape for encouraging me to come up with the seminar and the subsequent publication of this volume. The participants of the seminar deserve appreciations for bringing up critical ideas enriching our understanding of the riverine cultures of India. Ms. Ritika Sharma, Academic Resource Officer of IAS, has helped me and the participants immensely for which she deserves special thanks and appreciations. I thank the authors of the chapters in this book for their trust and patience. Without their contribution, this volume would not have seen the light of the day.

Prof. K. C. Baral, Prof. Jyotirmoy Prodhani, Prof. D. Venkat Rao, Prof. Bijay K. Danta, Prof. Sujata Gurudev and Prof. Dwijen Sharma have been constantly supporting my endeavours for which I will be forever indebted to them. I

am grateful to my family, friends and students for being the ever-flowing source of encouragement. My life and work are made easier by the support I receive from Gin Muan Thang, I. Amenla Changkija and her family, Surajit Sen, Vikas K. Singh, Anil Lal, Ravindra K. Vemula, Alankar Kaushik, Abir Suchiang, Temsunungsang, Preetinichaa, Aparajita Bhardwaj, Joshua Smith, Erica Smith, Mr. Mahmud Laskar and family, Sandinaki Bamon, Jobeth Warjiri, Shariful Hakim, Kanka Sayoo and Pamela Ryntong. Thanks to them for surrounding me with so much of love and care.

I am looking forward hoping that this volume will be able to cater to the needs of the enthusiasts which will be my honour and reward.

Introduction

As water has been vital for biological existence of animals and plants upon earth, water-bodies like rivers, seas, lakes etc. have occupied an essentially central place in the human world-view which often finds expression in culture and creative representations. Apart from providing drinking water, a river is used for bathing, swimming, fishing, moving across places through river routes, demarcating territories, for different rituals, and even for committing suicide; and floating of dead bodies in the river is considered a holy practice signifying the river as a passage from life to afterlife. Each of the activities signify how the “watery space” has been crucial in making (and unmaking) the very *being* of human around river and river-ecology which are ‘appropriated’ in our everyday world. Rivers have enabled a hydro-social life-world and culture where human subjectivity is constructed/formed according to the flow, current and characteristics of the river. However, socio-cultural mediations, macro and micro dynamics associated with the river, which can be material, social, cultural, economic, and political, prompt us to perceive the river not just as a natural physical flow of the water, but as a space (specifically an environmental space) which is not socially, culturally and politically neutral when human navigate through/with it and build a life-culture around it. Human activities and engagement with the river,

thus, form the basis of numerous narratives that call for serious academic deliberations. The present volume is an attempt to critically understand the representation of the river and riverine cultures in India as represented in various narrative traditions.

India is a land of rivers. More than 400 rivers flow from different regions across the country and merge themselves either with the Arabian Sea in the West or the Bay of Bengal in the East. India's rivers have always attracted people for their usefulness and beauty — be it the sages and priests, invaders, poets and artists or common inhabitants. Significantly, the national anthem of independent India composed by Rabindranath Tagore has a number of words related to river and flow of water — Punjab, Sindhu, Yamuna, Ganga, *uchchhala jaladhi taranga* — which is symbolic of the centrality of river/water in the geography as well as the collective consciousness of the people of this region. The name of India itself is taken from the river Sindhu. A number of cognate pronunciations are there for the word Sindhu — Persian Hindu, Greek Indus etc.; the other cognate words are – India, Indies, Indika. The name of the Indian state Punjab too is influenced by the presence of five rivers in the region (*panj* meaning five, *ab* meaning water/river). One would notice a magnificent tradition and linguistic culture even in the naming of the rivers. The Ganga has several names along its course, including its English version — the Ganges (both of which occur in this volume); the other names are Jahnavi, Shubhra, Sapteswari, Bhagirathi, Alkananda, Vishnupadi, etc. The river Brahmaputra similarly has a number of names — Tsangpo, Luit, Jamuna and Padma. A challenge to onomastics, river taxonomy, nomenclature and hydronymy reflect the linguistic culture, experience, and worldview of the people who name and distinguish the river as a “watery space” from other objects, and live by it.

River as a living entity is deeply entrenched in our literary and cultural consciousness as represented in various kinds of texts. The religious texts and ritualistic chants venerate the rivers as divine or quasi-divine entities; folktales and other forms of literature represent and reflect upon the man and nature/river relationship with a rich hue of imagination; a biological explorer would describe the organic life in and around the river in her narrative; films show rivers as settings and characters; other visual media like paintings project rivers in the form of mimetic signification; legal documents would deal with rivers related to possession or demarcation of land while journalistic writings are often seen to bring out issues like pollution, irrigation, dislocation due to dam building, global warming etc. that affect the river; even the satellite pictures represent the rivers through/as technological iconisation or icono-scaping that penetrates our terra-centric viewing of the world/earth and understanding of topography. The fact is that each of these kinds of texts somehow has river as a part of the narrative. In the academic arena, apart from the different disciplines of science, rivers have been at the centre of Anthropology, Ethnographic Studies, Geography, Literature and Cultural Studies and so on. Obviously, reading of such vast array of texts would represent the rivers in many and varied way.

In Indian culture, river is divine; it gives and nurtures life. The river-consciousness is so pervasive in our cultural imaginary that it finds a place of importance in day-to-day life in the form of riddles, idioms, phrases, and also in folklores, songs, and fictional narratives. The mythic and the spiritual meet in the origin of rivers and many shrines that adorn their banks. Rivers in India are also pivotal to our ritual culture. The holiness and purifying power of rivers resonate in the common chant in Hindu ritual practice:

गंगे च यमुने चैव गोदावरि सरस्वति । नर्मदे सिंधु कावेरि जलेऽस्मिन् सन्निधिं कुरु ॥

*Gange cha Yamune chaiva Godavari Saraswati |
Narmade Sindhu Kaveri jalesmin sannidhin kuru ||*

(Sri Bruhannardiya Puran)

The *sloka* can be translated as—“O rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri, please enrich the water I am bathing with, with your presence.” The *sloka* from *Sri Bruhannardiya Purana* is not simply an utterance but a deep reflection that validates the idea of cleaning the unclean and thereby cleansing all our sins and impurities. Further, the river goddess is also a source of our happiness in this world and the means of our liberation from the worldly life (*moksha*). Veneration of river is seen across religions. Muslims believe that a river flows in paradise. In Sikh religious faith too, water/river holds a very significant place and it is believed that Guru Nanak, the great founder of Sikhism, achieved enlightenment in the river. The *sarovars* or the holy water tanks are invariably found in Sikh *gurdwaras*. The river Kali Bein (Black Rivulet) is considered sacred by the Sikhs. The belief of a water spirit or river spirit is very common in almost all the communities. Khwaja Khizir (also spelt as Khijir, Khidir) as a mythical and spiritual entity of water/river has occupied the imagination of Indian subcontinent from Sindh to lower Assam. Losing someone in the river has often been associated with the spirit of Khizir or some other similar spirits like the female *jalpari* or water-nymph, which can be seen as a matter of (re-) negotiation of human-nature relationship and narrating the experience of the river through mythologizing the physical entity of the river. Besides the life-giving force of the rivers, we often, celebrate the confluence of Ganga-Jamuna referring to India’s syncretic culture as *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb*. From the religious-spiritual to cultural syncretism, rivers in India

become living symbols for creative writers across centuries.

The river as a metaphor unfolds the drama of life as it captures our imagination in diverse ways. From epic period to the present time, in the diverse aspects of our cultural journey over centuries, rivers have been central to many cultural practices, narratives, compositions and so on. As rivers are important for human life, they also signify human limitations in front of nature. Boats and bridges are human attempts to occupy and control the “watery-space” of the river while flood shows the uncontrollability of the river. As rivers become part of our shared heritage and culture, writings on/about rivers could be either a celebration of life or about the devastation that a river brings to many people. Besides creative writing, rivers in India have been part of popular and folk cultures through songs. The human tendencies and attitudes towards rivers are well reflected in literature and our cultures. The “river-ness” of a river gives rise to a number of metaphors, allegories and images. The flow of the river is often compared to the flow of life and of time that underlines continuity of life. The river in this sense becomes a physical entity of eternity. Bhupen Hazarika’s compositions on the Brahmaputra, Akshaya Mohanty’s on the Mahanadi and of many others from different languages charm us and also remind us of our cultural longing and belonging. The devastation brought by flood and erosion have been the trope of action in many texts that show how helpless human can be before nature’s fury. A.K. Ramanujan’s poem “The River” de-romanticizes the river with its realistic description of flood, while Keki N. Daruwala’s “A Boat-ride Along the Ganga” attempts to demythify the holy river. Our films are no exceptions; losing a close relative during a river festival or flood has been a common and popular theme in Indian movies while a large number of popular songs are about enticing the lover by the river bank. Rivers

that have been a means of trade and expeditions are also documented in travelogues, books and documentaries. Such varied representations problematize our understanding of the rivers giving glimpses of how important it is in our narratives.

As river has found an important place in our myths, scriptures, popular literature, cultural practices and in our consciousness, by offering a (re-)reading of them, this book has aimed at bringing together the cultural and creative conversations as we explore the centrality of rivers in our life. This is an attempt to explore how the river is represented in different narratives from the early folk narratives to modern day visual/digital culture. The chapters have focused upon various dimensions of our understanding as well as placing rivers in our spiritual, cultural, social, and everyday life. A brief outline of the chapters is given here to underline how the representation of the river in various creative representations can be studied and understood.

Our theological texts delineate the river as a space of transition from the physical life to the greater eternal life. Jibu M. George in his “Nature and Natural Phenomena in Enchanted and Disenchanted Worlds: From Religious World Views to Literary Freedoms” considers to look at the rivers in terms of a monistic cosmo-theistic framework, a dualistic theo-ontological framework, rationalistic naturalism, and religious naturalism. He makes a comparative study of how the water bodies like the sea, lake and river, etc. are seen in Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Indian conceptions. He projects how the river is seen as a site of transcendence, freedom and enchantment by giving reference to different rivers in different civilizations.

Indian rivers have been used as routes for trade and migration in ancient India. In the growth of the civilization in the Indian subcontinent, the rivers have played an immense role. Sanghamitra Rai Verman, in the chapter titled “Riverine

Trade in Ancient India: Revisiting Historical Texts”, explores the ancient historical engravings (seals, coins, etc.) and texts like the Vedas to discover how rivers were used and have been expressed in such texts. Citing the engravings, Verman makes an important illustration of how the rivers have played an important role in the migration of ancient people. She also explores the lexical discourse on the rivers citing the Vedas and shows how prayers and hymns were composed for river journeys. The *Jataka Tales*, *Smriti* literatures, *Arthashastra*, *Milindapanha*, *Harsacharita*, etc. have verses and a vast vocabulary related to river and boat journeys which portray how the rivers have shaped the ancient Indian civilization.

The orientalist discourse has given rise to reading colonial exploration and the colonial writings from the postcolonial and decolonial outlooks. The colonialists tried to use the river as an instrument of control over land and its people. Shaona Barik in “Uncanny Indian Rivers in the British Mindset in Colonial India” sketches the colonial intervention in the life of the rivers in the Indian subcontinent. She displays how the rivers were “tamed” in order to establish an imperialist and colonialist control over the nature/rivers and thereby over the native people (particularly, whose life was associated with the river). Construction of bridges, dams, barrages, and railways controlled the natural flow of the rivers; at the same time, this also made movement of the forces easier for controlling any uprising by the natives. Maps, charts, diagrams, tables and other forms of colonial narratives show how the colonialists looked at and represented the rivers as objects to be controlled though the rivers were deeply venerated by the native Indians.

River occupies a significant place in the writings of our national poet Shri Rabindranath Tagore. Subir Dhar in “Rabindranath Tagore: Rivers and the Discourse of Power” discusses Tagore’s understanding of the power of the rivers.

He looks upon Tagore's river-consciousness in terms of the concept of power as propounded by different thinkers like Michel Foucault. Dhar renders that the power of the river to Tagore is more intense than the quasi-Wordsworthian pantheistic power and it has moulded Tagore's personal and human constitution. As Tagore lived a life being close to the different rivers of Bengal, river is central to his thoughts and is crucial for his realizations about *existence* and *being*. Citing examples from Tagore's writings, the author argues that, to Tagore, rivers have transcendental power which is beyond human power. Rivers are, thus, a part of Tagore's innermost consciousness.

The word "sutra" is used to mean both a thread and a lore. The river culture can be said to have bound this great nation with a river-centric cultural thread, and river lores are part of that. Kailash C. Baral's "River Sutra: Poetics of River, Popular Culture and Bhupen Hazarika's River Songs" is a journey through different genres of narratives exploring how the river becomes a part of one's consciousness. Baral deliberates upon how the river has been an integral part of one's cultural as well as literary consciousness starting from the *Rig Veda* to the modern writings. Giving example of Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* and Bhupen Hazarika's songs, Baral illustrates that the cultural consciousness is constituted into a poetics of river in the river lores.

Flood in the river is often seen as a negative force of destruction; monsoon as a season is dreaded as it brings flood and devastation. However, our mythical narratives give a contradictory view of this by projecting a paradigm of representation of the river and flood as life-saving grace. "The Floating Child in Indian Mythology" by Umesha Patra contests how the river becomes a life-saving entity for many children in the Indian mythology. From saving the life of Krishna in the *Mahabharata* to saving the life of a child in the

movie *Bahubali*, the mythical paradigm prevails across the narrative genres and different mimetic media. Patra points out that the river here becomes a protector of life rather than a killer despite the overflow of water in it.

Rivers have a special space in the folk narratives. The spirit of the river and water nymphs often find mention in the folktales and songs. Sweta and Alka Lalhall in “Anthropomorphism of Rivers in Folk Songs of Gaddis of Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh” record how the popular narrative of Shiva and Ganga is retold in the Gaddi folklores. The Gaddi folk songs on the rivers like the Ravi, the Beas, and others help in the construction of the Gaddi identity and help in sustaining and conserving the cultural memories of the nomadic life of the Gaddis. Taking examples from the folklores, Sweta and Lalhall display how the narratives on the rivers become repository of different emotions and a reflection of the collective consciousness of the Gaddi people.

In “River Narratives and Tribal World View in the Khasi and Jaintia Folklore”, I. Amenla Changkija and Surajit Sen deal with rivers in the folktales of the Khasi and Jaintia tribes of North-East India. These river narratives can be read as discourses of tribal worldview which is mostly animist and also as representation of multispecies ethnography surrounding the rivers. Apart from the folk-beliefs, geography and cultural practices, the river narratives of the Khasis and Jaintias also display a rich linguistic culture in terms of the river nomenclature. A kind of renegotiation of human-nature relationship is prominently displayed in these narratives where physical human world and the metaphysical world of the spirits merge together in the “watery-space” of the river. Through these folktales, the river entities are looked upon as *beings* that have human-like abilities and emotions that provide a better understanding of the tribal psyche and the importance it attaches to the rivers and water entities.

In our present day, river-tourism is a popular economic and recreational activity that includes boat-rides, boat-houses and river adventures like rafting. In the travel magazines and travel advertisements, boat journeys are often shown as exciting activities. However, river-journeys for pilgrimage to various places on the river banks have been a very common and age-old practice. Places like Gangotri, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Varanasi, Prayag/Allahabad are popular pilgrimage sites in India. Bathing in the river and making offering to gods and ancestors in the river-banks are considered auspicious reiterating the role of the river as a passage to *moksha*. In “Gods and Bazaars Across the River: Representation of the Ganges in Bengali Pilgrimage Narrative *Tirthamangal*”, Arkadeb Bhattacharya reflects upon an 18th century Bangla travelogue *Tirthamangal* composed in the style of the *Mangalkavyas* that gives quite a contrary view of the modern travel magazines. Bhattacharya explores how the travelogue represents the contemporary socio-economic life through a river journey. Here the river appears to be a backdrop, a means of a pilgrimage undertaken by a group of Bengali pilgrims, who offer *shraddha* rituals for their ancestors. The narrative can be read as a retelling of the river which paradoxically gives a de-mythifying representation of the river though the journey is undertaken following the mythical and religious faith.

Boat and boatmen are integral in our understanding of the importance of the river for human life. Boats are made to ferry across the rivers as well as fishing. Boats have also been used as military forces for conquest of territories. Boats signify a force to conquer and control the forces of nature like the rivers. There are numerous literary and visual works on boat culture. P. Muralidhar Sharma in “On the Sail: Boatmen and Boat Journeys in Indian River Fiction” deliberates upon how the river can be seen and understood when it is ferried upon

by boats. Through an analysis of short stories like “On the Boat” by P. Padmaraju, and “Boatman Tarini” by Tarashanker Banerjee, and celebrated novels like Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Boat-Wreck* and Manik Bandopadhyay’s *The Boatman of the Padma*, Sharma examines how the river journeys on boat become symbolic of attitudes ranging from world-weariness, resignation from life, spiritual elevation as well as notions of struggle for existence, subservience to exploitative structures, transgression and/or sexual access/excess.

Human civilization flourished through a series of migrations and rivers often facilitated human migration. The Indian state of Assam, which has a number of rivers, has been a home to many a people who have migrated and eventually settled in the river valleys contributing to the growth of a composite Assamese culture. Referring to the migration narratives of Assam, Arzuman Ara discusses how the river became a route of migration of the different communities like the British, Nepalis and Bengal-origin Assamese community in the chapter titled “River in the Migration Narratives of Assam”. The chapter shows how the river becomes a part of not only livelihood but also of the spiritual and existential *self* of the characters in the narrative. Here the floods in the rivers destroy lives but also provide resources for a renewal of life for the migrant communities helping them to settle into a new life. Thus, the rivers become the space for regeneration for the migrant communities.

The issue of sharing the physical space of land as property have been a serious issue in our legal narratives; we have an epic narrative like the *Mahabharata* where sharing the land becomes a major cause of the epic war where the land becomes a (disputed) space associated with ego, pride, inheritance, propriety, rights, and *dharma*. Land as a solid space can be divided. Can we, but, divide the non-solid liquid watery river too? Can water and the flow of water be divided? Can the

shared cultural heritage of belonging to the rivers be divided? These intriguing questions remind us that the “space-ness” of the river is indivisible by humans. The Partition of India in 1947 ended up dividing the land (and life) by drawing the infamous Radcliffe line creating two nations — India and Pakistan. Could it divide the rivers too? To seek an answer in “How does the River/Water Speak in the Partition Narratives of the Indian Subcontinent?”, Praveen Mridha reflects upon the role of rivers in the Partition of India in 1947. Citing examples from different narratives, Mridha exhibits that the water of the rivers is indivisible and the rivers are still a binding force of the people as the rivers help in continuing with the same culture of life across the borders that have been existing since the pre-Partition period. She proclaims that the rivers, like the Ravi, the Sutlej, the Beas, the Jhelum, the Chenab etc. are witnesses of the human crises ensued by the Partition, and they can still be seen as symbols of hope and reconciliation. In the recent years, when we come across numerous national and international feuds on sharing river water, this chapter brings a new look in the problematics of sharing of the natural resources like rivers.

Exploitation of the natural resources by humans has become a central trope of Anthropocene. Human greed has not spared the resources of the river in the name of modernity and development. In “*Cosmopolitics: Reading the Riverine Stories in BVS Rama Rao’s Godavari Kathalu*”, Kotti Sree Ramesh and D. Jyothirmai look at how the river Godavari has been a nurturing force in the life of people as represented in different narratives based on the Godavari. Along with different spiritual and superstitious belief system and worldview regarding the river, the authors also depict how the resources of the river have been exploited creating clashes among the modern men due to their greed. The age-old harmonious cosmopolitics of life is challenged due to

extractive and industrialized dispensation which disturbs the ecological balance of the region nourished by the Godavari.

Building of dams penetrates the natural flow of the rivers. It is often proclaimed as a sign of development in the political rhetoric. However, activists and naturalists oppose this kind of activity vehemently as dams often end up destroying the eco-systematic life in and around the river. Modern narratives capture the pangs of such displacement which can also be read as critique of modernity itself when it becomes a capitalist and industrial venture. Chand M Basha in “River of Plaintive Voices: Darker Sides of Modernity in Na. D’Souza’s *Dweepa: The Island*” brings forth how modernity and displacement get interconnected in the river narratives of Na. D’Souza. Modern/izing activities like building a dam disrupts the local life of the riverine populace and results in exploitation of the natural resources. It disturbs the spiritual and emotional attachment between the river and the native families living in the river basin. The chapter draws that the literary text itself becomes a testimony of the painful lives of the natives of the Malenadu regions of Karnataka who suffered due to construction of the Linganamakki dam across the Sharavati river for building modern cities.

Our mythical and popular narratives on rivers get a new visual rendition in the films. Some of the films do reassert the mythical paradigms (as we have in Patra’s writing in this volume), however, some films represent rivers with unexpected twists. In “Ganga on the Celluloid: A Feminist Reading of Select Films”, Malvika Sharad deliberates upon representation of the holy river Ganga/Ganges as an idea, an image, and a metaphor in the visual narratives. Taking example of films like Raj Kapoor’s *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, Deepa Mehta’s *Water* and Neeraj Ghaywan’s *Masaan*, Sharad portrays how the river Ganga assumes a mythical as well as meta-mythical stature in the visual representation. The

popular river signifiers and concepts related specifically to the river Ganga, like the city of Varanasi, purity-pollution, feminization of the river, denunciation etc. are contested through the lens of Gender Studies by Sharad. Sharad argues that such representation of the Ganga is more about the socio-political culture than the popular mythical representation when read through a feminist lens.

The river narratives are our cultural and creative spaces which give expression to our varied feelings and experiences of the river. The narratives on river and riverine cultures make a vast repository for reading in all the languages in India. Bringing their discussion all in one book is obviously a Herculean task. This book makes a modest attempt to explore just a handful of them. The endeavour is to explore the river, not just as a watery physical space, but as a space of our very existence. If this book is successful in arousing the curiosity and enthusiasm of the readers and river-lovers, my endeavour will be rewarded.

ARZUMAN ARA

1

Nature and Natural Phenomena in Enchanted and Disenchanted Worlds

From Religious Worldviews to Literary Freedoms

Jibu Mathew George

What this chapter aspires to offer by way of insights on the status of rivers in human conceptions — both imaginative ones and those found in larger worldviews (explicit or implicit) — has for its provenance occidental intellectual history, with focus on transitions in worldviews, specific philosophical reflections, and related cross-cultural findings. It is hoped that this will serve as an overall framework, or a meta-framework, for conceptualizing the diversity of cultural positions on natural phenomena and particular representations thereof. The point of departure is Max Weber's oft-cited concept "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*), which he enunciated in his 1917 Munich lecture "Wissenschaft als Beruf" ("Science as a Vocation"). Using the famous phrase *Entzauberung der Welt*, which he had borrowed from Friedrich Schiller, Weber outlined a process which Western civilization

had been experiencing for several millennia, and reached a highpoint with the scientific revolutions of modernity. In Weber's work, the phrase denotes: i) a development *within* religion from magic to rationalized paths to salvation devoid of magic (e.g. Calvinism), which we will not be discussing here; and ii) an understanding of the world's occurrences and events increasingly by reference to natural forces, which are humanly controllable by rational calculation; physical laws; and mechanical principles than to magical and supernatural powers (Weber/Kalberg, 2005: xxii-xxiii). Disenchantment is not to be confused with secularization, which Charles Taylor (2007: 2-3) describes in terms of three developments: i) a retreat of religion from the public sphere; ii) the falling off of religious belief or practice; and iii) a movement from an unchallenged belief in God to a condition wherein this belief is only one among the many options. Disenchantment, as Hans Joas (2012:12) notes, "is certainly not — as has frequently been assumed — secularization ..., but 'demagicization,' [which] occurs when processes in the world lose their 'magical meaning.'" Disenchantment is deprivation of mystique, a premise that is vitally fertile for literary/artistic re-enchantments.

As opposed to what the 'binaristic' formulation in the title (enchanted vs. disenchanted) might suggest, this chapter examines the status of natural phenomena within the matrices of four world views – i) a monistic cosmo-theistic framework (typical of the enchanted world); ii) a dualistic theo-ontological framework; iii) rationalistic naturalism (typical of the disenchanted world); and iv) religious naturalism (which can aid a putative re-enchantment).

The cosmo-theistic framework is one of immanent divinity, or, with some qualifications, we may say that divinity is dispersed across natural phenomena. When the ancient people who subscribed to this framework, often

implicitly, said that ‘the river spoke’ or worried about “the wrath of the river”, they were not speaking in figurative language. Adumbrating the premises of this worldview, in the context of the Ancient Near East but obviously not limited to the region or epoch, Henri Frankfort and H.A. Frankfort contests the “anthropomorphic” theory of primitive world conceptualizations and elaborates on the “personal” mode of primitive man’s thinking about nature:

This does not mean (as is so often thought) that primitive man, in order to explain natural phenomena, imparts human characteristics to an inanimate world. *Primitive man simply does not know an inanimate world. For this reason, he does not “personify” inanimate phenomena nor does he fill an empty world with the ghosts of the dead, as “animism” would have us believe....* The world appears to primitive man neither inanimate nor empty but redundant with life; and life has individuality, in man and beast and plant, and in every phenomenon which confronts man — the thunderclap, the sudden shadow, the eerie and unknown clearing in the wood, the stone which suddenly hurts him when he stumbles while on a hunting trip. Any phenomenon may at any time face him, not as “It,” but as “Thou.” In this confrontation, “Thou” reveals its individuality, its qualities, its will. “Thou” is not contemplated with intellectual detachment; it is experienced as life confronting life....

(1977: 5-6; emphasis added)

This “personal” understanding of natural phenomena has been so popular in the long-history of humanity that even when the worldview within which the above understanding could be considered valid became obsolete, at least in cultures for which the world became disenchanting, it was resuscitated or accommodated in surrogate forms, as in literary representations. Even in the absence of a religious imagination or an explicit literary intent, in popular culture, especially in the countryside, as is the case with accidents involving several rivers of Kerala (Periyar, Pamba, Meenachil,

Achenkovil, and Manimalayar), it is common for people to generally present drowned men as victims of a *femme fatale* river or seductress who draws them into her lap and returns them lifeless to the land once she is “satisfied”.

In the dualistic theo-ontological framework, exemplified by Judeo-Christianity, God and the cosmos are two different entities and the former presides over the latter — God is separate from the cosmos and is the Lord of the cosmos.¹ The Red Sea parts at divine command as it happens during the emancipation of Israelites from bondage in Egypt, and the waters of the Nile turn red during the first of the ten plagues of Egypt. Though animals and reptiles, such as the serpent in *Genesis* and Balaam’s donkey in *Numbers*, do speak, inanimate matter is forever inanimate, that is, literally, without ‘life’ or ‘soul.’ The four rivers of Eden (at least two of them are identified with historical rivers) — Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel (the Tigris), and Phirat (the Euphrates) — simply serve divine purposes. They are not even lesser divinities, as in ancient Greek and Roman conceptions, either autonomous entities or subservient to a supreme deity or greater deities.

As Ken Dowden, drawing upon much archival material, notes in the Chapter “Spring, Lake, River” of his book *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*:

Pliny the younger describes how coins can be seen through the clear water of the Clitumnus [a river in Umbria, Italy] ... And an inscription from Narni [Italy] records coin offerings so copious that a statue, double doors and trimmings could be made from them.... in Gaul rivers have frequently been found to contain offerings, usually of military equipment, and found in bulk particularly near fords.... Similarly, ‘thousands of coins of the Roman period and metal figures of animals, birds and gods have been found in the Thames at London’.... And when the Olympic Games were held visitors threw gifts into the River Alpheios [the longest river in the Peloponnese, in

Greece]. *Crossing rivers* was a matter of particular importance for Europeans as for other peoples. At Rome, the reconstruction of the Pons Sublicius [the earliest known bridge of ancient Rome, spanning River Tiber] called for sacrifices on both banks conducted by the Roman priests, the *pontifices*, whose name, despite all clever theories to the contrary, obviously means ‘bridgemakers.’... It is important above all for an army that crosses a river to make transit offerings (*diabateria*). Even the philosophical but religiously conservative Emperor Marcus Aurelius, at the height of the war against the Germanic Marcomanni and Quadi (in the early 170s), could be induced to cast two lions alive into the Danube presumably as an offering for safe crossing. The lions, however, just swam across to the other side and the unimpressed Germans finished them off with clubs. (2000: 55-56)

Dowden is quoted at length to make two key points. First, when the Romans threw lions *into* the Danube or when coins are thrown *in* several rivers to propitiate the river, and not a higher deity that presides over water bodies or deities representing them, it is the first worldview, that of cosmo-theism, which is at work. Had it been the second, that is, a theo-ontological framework, the lions would have been sacrificed and the coins would have been collected at the abode, as it were, of the deity, say a temple. Second, a historical contrast obtains here, which is of import to us in the Indian context. While the Judeo-Christian dualistic theo-ontological framework *replaced* the erstwhile monistic cosmo-theistic framework of what is called paganism (except perhaps for the resurgent neo-paganistic beliefs), in India these outlooks and corresponding practices coexist and are in vogue side by side, with perfect legitimacy. This is one of the reasons why Religious Studies scholars use the term “collegiate religion” to describe Hinduism — rather than the ordinary language terminology of “a way of life”. In the context of rivers, this ideational coexistence is evident when

people worship rivers and river deities/spirits, a practice more popular in folk Hinduism (which occupies one end of the collegiate spectrum, at the other end of which one may find the metaphysics of Dvaita, Advaita, and Viśiṣṭadvaita), and at the same time can pray to a higher deity to save them from the floods.

Here is a sidebar, but one which is crucial in respect of apprehensions concerning application of Western models to non-Western cultures or cultural phenomena. For instance, it is pointed out that terms such as *faith* and *belief* apply only to some, not all, religions. Ken Dowden, cited earlier, has observed that European pagan religions were “non-credal cultures” (2000: xv): “... paganism is largely not a matter of belief ... it speaks the language of actions, the language of ritual” (ibid: 25). Indeed, religion is not only about beliefs and ideas but is also an ensemble of practices, institutions, communities, and ways of life. However, Henk S. Versnel (2011: 539-540), in the context of ancient Greek religion, contests the claim of Rodney Needham and Wilfred Cantwell Smith that the term “belief” is intrinsically a Western and Christian notion and cannot be applied to many other religious cultures. Addressing the question of belief in action-oriented ritualistic religion, Versnel refers to the work of Donald Wiebe (1979), who forcefully argued that the study of religion(s) “is impossible without use of the concept (category) of belief”; and of A. Boyce Gibson (1970), for whom “Religion ... is not a way of life imposed upon a state of affairs; it is a way of life *with a conviction about a state of affairs built into it*” (Versnel, 2011: 12; emphasis added). It appears safe to assume that that religion as a way of life or set of practices also has an underlying metaphysic, albeit an implicit and/or non-systematized one. Indeed, many Western concepts are inadequate to capture the experiential singularity of other cultures and/or do not have equivalents in the latter. The

imperative here is to formulate the meta-discursive terms for inter-tradition engagement rather than be content with articulations of mutual exclusiveness. For instance, Śāṅkara's *adhyāsa* (often translated as superimposition) and Kantian "categories"² are not the same but show commonalities and also differences (Śāṅkara's primary concerns are metaphysical while Kant's are epistemological — according to Śāṅkara's Advaita, Brahman is the sole reality and the apparent multiplicity of phenomena is an illusion or the result of superimposition). Similarly, folk religious belief systems of India, of which local river cults are a conspicuous component, show affinities with the characteristics that Dowden finds in European paganism (e.g. the significance attached to sacred groves).

The third framework, that of rationalistic naturalism, marks the disenchanting world. Here the universe is neither animated nor open to any influence external to it, such as that of supernatural agents. In the naturalistic *Lebenswelt*, nature is inert; it does not care. As for human responses to it, as Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously put it, it is one of "instrumental reason" (2002:228). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, rationality generates an imperialistic desire to dominate everything and everyone. With regard to nature, its motto is "learn, use, and dominate". Enlightenment reason gave the final legitimacy and ultimate scientific tools for complete domination over nature: "To dominate nature boundlessly, to turn the cosmos into an endless hunting ground, has been the dream of millennia ... another. It was the purpose of reason, on which man prided himself" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002: 206). It is the instrumental rationality that is often considered but *need not be* the deterministic consequence of a rationalistic-naturalistic *Weltanschauung* that Rabindranath Tagore critiques, alongside colonial exploitation, in his play

Muktadhara (1922), where King Ranajit of Chitrakoot blocks the free course of a waterfall — a nostalgic leitmotif that features in most narratives that contrast pristine, bucolic life-worlds with the apparent tyranny and corruption of industrial modernity.

Interestingly, rationalistic naturalism has endeavoured to re-interpret in retrospect the so-called supernatural interventions involving natural phenomena — in keeping with the post-Enlightenment trend of naturalizing the supernatural. For instance, Stephen Mortlock (2019) inquires if the ten plagues of Egypt were the result of an “ecological domino effect” or “divine intervention.” We will restrict ourselves to the plague involving the Nile. According to Mortlock, what is narrated in *Genesis* is the result of a climate change:

It is possible that the Nile turned from a swiftly flowing river into a sluggish, muddy watercourse due to ... rising temperatures and arid conditions. This was the basis of the 1950s naturalistic theory by Greta Hort, who proposed that certain algae in particular, *Haematococcus pluvialis* and *Euglena sanguinea*, were able to flourish in these conditions. The red colour is due to the presence of astaxanthin and under the right conditions the cells can be populous enough to turn water red. *Euglena sanguinea* is also known to produce the potent ichthyotoxin euglenophycin. The idea of an algal bloom is also proposed by Dr Stephan Pflugmacher, who believes that when the Nile changed it allowed the toxic algae *Planktothrix rubescens* to thrive in the warm slow moving water. When the algae died it turned the water red, causing a phenomenon called “Burgundy blood”. (np)

Religious naturalism, the fourth of the frameworks, is concerned with the question of whether there can be a post-supernatural (or non-supernatural) religion in the wake of scientific explanations. According to Jerome A. Stone (2008:

1), religious naturalism “asserts that there seems to be no ontologically distinct and superior realm (such as God, soul, or heaven) to ground, explain, or give meaning to this world, but that yet religious significance can be found *within* this world” (emphasis added). One finds a variety of religious naturalisms across cultures: pantheism, panentheism, panpsychism, materialism, monism, holism, process theology, emergentism, religious humanism, idealism, integrationism, contextualism, biotheology, naturalistic mysticism, religiopoetics, and operational theism. We need not go into the details of this categorization; what is of import to us is that to most religious naturalists, the universe, considered as a web of life, a unity in itself, even if closed to external influences, has a *sacred* significance. Analogous to traditional religion, sacrilege here means violating the sacred unity of the cosmos, its web of life — or, in more specific terms, violence to the non-human part of nature. In such a conception of the universe, pollution of the river, or any water body for that matter, is sacrilege. One may even find here the foundational principles of a new *ecological ethic*.

Now, what roles do literature and literary representations play in a disenchanted world? Richard Jenkins, Morris Berman, Ernest Gellner, Gordon Graham, and Christopher Partridge, among others, have either questioned claims of disenchantment, or articulated the possibility of re-enchantments through alternative spiritualities, new creeds, esotericisms, quasi-religious philosophical systems, depth psychology, ethnomethodology, fantasy, technology, consumption, and, above all for us, art.³ In respect of natural phenomena, literary imagination shares with religious imagination the capacity to *enhance* its object — to animate, to personify, to assign a role larger than that usually ascribed to inanimate matter. But, as literary critics are well aware, any attempt to attribute motives and feelings to natural

phenomena invites the charge of pathetic fallacy — in a disenchanted world. The point to be noted, however, is that even in a disenchanted world, literary discourse is recognized as having only a *limited ontological commitment*, and its freedoms are derived from this recognition. The rules of discourse have been traditionally, and deliberately, relaxed for it. Figures of speech are placed at its disposal. These freedoms enable literary discourse to occupy a liminal space between enchantment and disenchantment and also reach beyond the empirical and the immediate into the realm of larger meanings. Not surprisingly, the device of symbolism comes quite handy. Even in a world devoid of any notion of the sacred whatsoever, it should be possible to say in the literary *façon de parler* that a dip in a river symbolizes an encounter with the transcendent (in the sense of beyond the immediate) in the same breath as one says Mark Twain's Mississippi is for Jim and Huckleberry Finn a symbol of freedom. One often finds in interpretations of the river in literary texts the critical platitude that a river is an “enduring presence”, *almost a character* (e.g. M. Mukundan's *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi* or Mahe; the Nila — another name for Bharatappuzha — in M. T. Vasudevan Nair's novels). Within the discourse of limited ontological commitment, an inanimate river can become quasi-personal, a character — without taking recourse to fantasy or magic realism.

Obviously, the functional catalogue is longer than suggested above. The river, perhaps due to its smaller size, unlike oceans (and even mountains and deserts), hardly became a widely used metaphor for the overwhelming sense of the sublime that sources of re-enchantment, alternative to the numinous (the divine), usually evoke. Romain Rolland, inspired by the mystical experiences of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, referred to an “oceanic [not riverine] feeling,” which Sigmund Freud discusses in *Civilization and*

Its Discontents (1930) and *Future of an Illusion* (1927). This did not stop the river from being portrayed as a stable, static setting (as opposed to Heraclitus' use of the river as symbol of flux when he said, "You cannot step into the same river twice") against which the dynamic drama of human affairs is played out — for example, the Meenachil River at Ayemenem in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997). Sophy Mol drowns in the Meenachil. Ammu meets her low-caste lover, Velutha, on its banks, the policemen cross it to arrest him, and eventually to torture him to death, changing Estha and Rahel's lives forever. Meenachil, a mute witness to all that had happened, still flows as Rahel returns to Ayemenem on a rainy afternoon, years after Ammu's suicide, leaving the reader with the uncanny thought "these are the people who went through all the tragedy — and survived". By and large, this is also the outlook suggested by Alfred Lord Tennyson's lines — "For men may come and men may go,/ But I go on forever." Pertinently, in this case the lines are uttered of a much smaller water body — a brook, not a river.

Understandably, re-enchantment in the above-described sense is not an exclusive functional prerogative or possibility of literature, or any art for that matter. It has to do with the enhancing perspective one may or may not bring to an otherwise inert natural world. Fortunately, this enhancement process can operate both on the level of worldviews and of linguistic freedom. In both, an otherwise inert nature can animate itself and even re-appropriate quasi-human agency, thus overcoming its status as an object of naturalized inattention in the everyday lives of human subjects.

Notes

1. Marcel Gauchet (1997) traces the origins of disenchantment to,

- among other things, the externalization of the divine in a personal god who was amenable to human influence.
2. According to R. Puligandla (2013), “*Adhyāsa* is superimposing on the formless, nameless, non-dual Brahman; various forms and names which logically imply judgments of attribution and relation” (p.616). He argues that “the kind of superimposing Śaṅkara has in mind is similar to the kind Kant envisions we do with the categories to create phenomena. This makes the idea of *māyā* more intelligible — it is created by the contribution of consciousness — and also explains why the Hindu paths to *moksha* are what they are: they help correct consciousness to lift the veil of *māyā* and permit seeing the true nature of Brahman” (qtd. in Levine 2013: 605).
 3. For example, to Georg Simmel and young György Lukács, art was “the secular equivalent of a salvation belief” (Whimster and Lash, 1987: 269).

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2

Riverine Trade in Ancient India

Revisiting Historical Texts

Sanghamitra Rai Verman

The turbulent Ganges plunges from the paradise, humbles down as it flows through the serpentine locks of Shiva's hair before it splashes onto the Indian expanses...

The Journey Begins...

Man took long perilous journeys across the great seas and continents. History has witnessed great migrations including Aryan migration to India. People burned forests, crossed difficult mountains and deserts, and migrated to different parts of the world; India was also no exception as a destination. Long journeys were taken up by pastoral nomadic people and they entered the Indian subcontinent. In course of their wandering, these nomadic people in search of fodder for their flocks must have got themselves gradually acquainted with the natural routes of the country. But even before them, the primitive hunters in search of their prey must have tread on the natural routes which afterwards were used by the conquerors and merchants, and gradually

assumed the character of highways. Man gradually settled down with sedentary lifestyle and practised primitive agriculture along with herding. In this primitive stage man had to depend on incipient commerce through rivers and land routes for procuring essential goods like salt, metals, etc. Subsequently, man started discovering new routes and with enhanced geographical knowledge, distant civilizations came closer. But travelling was not easy through dense forests infested with wild beasts, robbers, and probably from this consideration human beings started travelling in groups and caravans came into existence. Distant trade, both inland and overseas, was carried out under the leadership of caravan leaders who ensured protection and safety of the groups.

Proto Historical Period

The Indus Valley people traded through both land, river, and maritime trade routes. River Indus was its lifeline. Representation of boats on Indus seals and potsherds bears the testimony to the presence of regular trade and commerce through water. One can assume that boats must have plied on the rivers of Indus Valley. This can be drawn from the engravings found from Mohenjodaro and Harappa. We get four depictions of boats from the engravings on potsherds and seals. One boat has been engraved on potsherd with prow and stern and it has a sail attached to the mast and a sailor is rowing it with a rower.

From ancient times, India has never been geographically isolated and it had maritime trading network with the Mesopotamian civilization. The *lapis lazuli* (blue colour stone) that came from Afghanistan or Iran, and similar kinds of beads discovered from ancient Mesopotamia and Harappan sites indicate regular contact among the people of these regions.¹ The Kulli and Zhob culture of Baluchistan

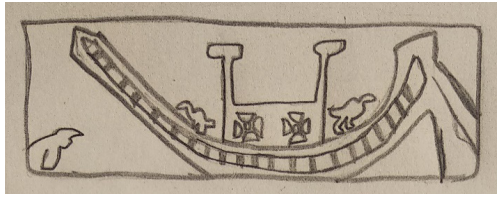


Fig.1. Boat design, Mohenjodaro, c. 2500 BCE.

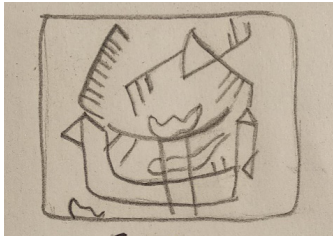


Fig.2. Boat design on Harappan Seal, c. 2500 BCE.



Fig.3. A terracotta amulet showing a boat with a cabin, Mohenjodaro, c. 2500 BCE



Fig.4. Boat impression on terracotta, Lothal, c. 2500 BCE.

also show clear contact with Iran and Iraq. The Bull culture which is indigenous to Indus Valley finds its representation in a pot from Sumer (Mesopotamia) and Susa (Iran) clearly indicating such a contact. Seals and ceramics from the Indus Valley found in Mesopotamia and vice versa, directly testify to maritime trading links. Boats have been depicted in the Indus seals and potsherds indicating that they might have plied between the ancient Indus and Mesopotamia.

From Lothal, we find stones with measurement marks that certainly offer strong circumstantial evidences of market economy. ² S. R. Rao, in *Further Excavations at Lothal* (1963), refers that three types of boats might have been in use.³ Seal impression from Mohenjodaro shows light boats for rivers and ocean boats for far flung trade routes. D.D. Kosambi⁴ has drawn attention to a boat impression on a plate with clear impression of sail, the oar and an anchor. George F. Dales⁵ has excavated a terracotta object with the representation of prow and stern, masts, cabin, two oars and three sea birds (Figure 1). Probably this was a river boat as it has no mast. According to E. Mackey, boats might have plied to the mouth of the river Indus and sailed to the coastal region of Baluchistan.⁶

Rivers might have also played important roles in Aryan migration. Moti Chandra in *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India* (1975: 40) refers that the Aryans might have come from the north using river routes and sparingly used the Bolan pass. The Aryans might have used the course of the river Kubha and the second route was probably from Kapisa to Kandhar through the banks of Khurram and river Gomal to reach river Indus. ⁷

The Vedic Period

People gradually moved out of the Punjab region due to changes in climatic conditions and started moving towards the East. The Vedic literature constantly refers to these early

path-finders. *Agni* is designated as '*pathikrit*' (pioneer) because by burning vast jungle tracks, it created routes following which the Vedic culture entered the distant corners of India. *Satapatha Brahmana* refers to river Sadanira (Gandak) as the boundary line between the kingdoms of Kosala and Videha. Wandering in dense forests and making passable routes, the Vedic culture gradually entered Indian mainland through the Vedic ascetics and traders. *Charaiveti* hymn of the *Aitereya Brahmana* (7.14) laid stress on movements and travels of the people.⁸

Water routes have been referred as *Varipatha* in the *Vedas*. *Rig Veda* and later the *Samhitas* mention about transportation through boats. *Nau* is referred for smaller boats plying in the rivers. *Rig Veda* (10. 155.3) refers to *darunauka* (boat made of tree trunks/wood) which were probably used by the rafters. Many technical terms about navigation are found in the *Vedas*. *Dyumna* (*Rig Veda*, 8.19.14), *Plava* (R.V *Rig Veda*, 1.182.5) were a kind of small boats. The oar was known as *aritra*. Oarsmen were *aritri*, sailors were *navaja* (*Satapatha Brahmana* 2.3.3.5), anchor was *naumanda* and *sambina* (*Atharva Veda* 9.2.6) was the pole to push the boat.⁹ We also find good number of references about sea and sea trade. *Rig Veda* (1.56.2; 4.55.6) mentions that sea voyages were carried out for profit. *Aitereya Brahmana* (3.39.7) describes the sea as bottomless that nourishes the land, and the *Satapatha Brahmana* (1.6.3.11) mentions of *Ratnakara* (Arabian Sea) and *Mahodadhi* (Bay of Bengal).

People travelled in caravans as it was difficult to travel alone. The *Prithvi Sukta* hymn of *Atharva Veda* (*Atharva Veda*. XII.I.47) even refers to the prayers of the merchants for protection against wild beasts and robbers. In fact, water routes were preferred over inland routes to escape wild animals, robbers and also natural calamities which frequently made overland routes impregnable. India is a land of several rivers, and merchants in ancient India preferred to carry out

trade through the river routes because it was comparatively cheaper, easier, safer, and quicker.

River Routes in *Jatakas*

The word *nadi* is derived from Sanskrit root word ‘*nad*’ meaning channel, stream, or flow and the word finds numerous mentions in the *Jatakas*. The *Jatakas* made numerous references to concerted commercial activities of the traders — both overland as well as overseas including the rivers. The *Mahajanaka Jataka* mentions that the people took *nadipatha* (river route) which followed the lower bank of the Ganges for sailing from *Campa* (capital city of *Anga*) to *Tamralipti* and thence the traders sailed across the sea routes to reach *Suvarnabhumi*. We find frequent mention of *Suvarnavipa* in the *Jatakas* which was often visited by the Indian merchants in search of aromatics and spices. *Supparaka Jataka* refers to the brave sailors of ancient India who crossed *Khuramala* (the Persian Gulf), *Agnimala* (Red Sea), *Balabhamukha* (Mediterranean Sea), etc.

Jatakas refer to Western Sea ports like *Bharukachcha*,¹⁰ *Supparaka* and *Sovira*¹¹ which were connected through rivers and thereby connected with internal trade. Cotton textile was the most sought-after commodity of both internal and external trade. Cotton clothes from Kasi (present day Varanasi) were known as *Kasikuttama* or *Kasiya*.¹² Silk and brocades of Varanasi were also famous since antiquity. *Mahaparinibbanasutta* (Vol. V, 16) refers that after the death of Lord Buddha, his body was shrouded with fine gold-coloured robes probably brocade.¹³ *Jatakas* also refer to many ship wrecks in the sea whirlpools. *Vahalasya Jataka*¹⁴ mentions one such ship wreck near Ceylon. This *Jataka* story is amply reflected in *Bharhut* and *Sanchi* reliefs which give us valuable information about the fears of the water travels. Strange

creatures like sharks, pointed spikes, gigantic tortoise, etc. which the sailors came across are represented in these bas reliefs.



Fig.5. Whale attacking a boat, Bharhut, 1st – 2nd century BCE

The *Jatakas* also inform us that ships were made of timber planks (*daruphalakani*) and they sailed with favourable wind (*erakvayuyutta*). In the ships, there were three masts (*kupa*),¹⁵ rigging (*yottaran*), planks (*padarani*) and oars (*lankharoh*).¹⁶ The *Jatakas* mention about ferry services on rivers and small boats or *ekadoni*.¹⁷ We find mention of king of Kasi crossing river Ganges by a flotilla known as *Bahunavasanghata*.¹⁸

Both the *Smriti* literature and *Jatakas* refer to organization of guilds by merchants and artisans. We come across the terms like *sarthavaha* or corporate body of merchants, *jetthaka* or guild leader, *sreni* or guild of traders and so on. *Jarudapana Jatakas* refer to a large caravan with cart load of wares consisting of a number of traders of Sravasti who set off together under a chief called as *jetthaka*. Stories tell that they made huge profit and came back together and they went to pay respect to Lord Buddha.

Travellers travelling by the rivers became a common feature in ancient India. Travelling on the rivers gradually

became organized. Fares were paid and bridges were constructed across the rivers. *Divyavadana* informs us that *Ajatasatru* had built a river bridge. References of a bridge on river Gandak is found as well.¹⁹ Thus we could find out that huge fortune was made out of riverine and maritime trading activities and this is exemplified in *Manu's Code*, Chapter VIII, which lays down the duties which were to be paid for sea voyages as well as for overland journeys.²⁰

The Mauryan Period

The Mauryan Empire brought about considerable development in the trade and commerce. Trade regulations were carefully planned, well-organized and trade was under the state control, under the *panyadhaksha* or the superintendent of trade.²¹ The superintendent had the right to sale, purchase, distribute and maintain the quality of the products.²² Tolls were imposed both on the imports as well as the exports. Trade was licensed, prices were controlled and profit of the traders were fixed at the rate of 5 per cent for the home markets and 10 per cent for the foreign markets.²³

Rivers played a vital role in ferrying the commodities and, thus, in maintaining the internal supply; this helped in the movement of commodities into the ports from where they were traded to distant lands. During the Mauryan period, we could observe that travelling became a much organized state-controlled activity. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* explicitly tells that the merchants used to move by the river routes or *Nadipatha* and sea route or *Varipatha*. Merchants often considered water route to be a safer option than that of land route.²⁴ Even Kautilya's *Arthashastra* observes that the river routes were better than the land routes. Among the rivers which served the purpose of communication and transportation were the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Sarayu, the Kosi and others.

Campa, Pataliputra, Kasi, Tamralipti were connected with water routes.²⁵ There was regular ferry services and someone who crossed the river without permission had to even pay a fine of 263/4 *panas*.²⁶ Ancient Indians were also efficient in digging up navigable canals which served as important water passage known as *Kulyapatha*.²⁷ *Varipatha* or sea routes were of two kinds — *Kulapatha* or coastal route and *Samyanapatha* or maritime trade route. According to E. Mackey (1949: 149) *Kulapatha* was probably used from the Indus Valley Civilization up to the Mesopotamian Civilization.²⁸

Arthasastra refers to superintendent of shipping (*naukadhakshya*) who was in charge of the ships voyaging to the oceans (*samudrasamyana*) and boats sailing on the rivers. Before sailing from the ports, travellers were required to pay a tax to the state (*yatra-vetana*). Strict rules (*harita*) were framed for the management of the ports (*panyapattana*). *Arthasastra* underlines several duties of the superintendent of shipping (*naukadhakshya*). They supervised the work of the officers employed in the ports and were required to have a paternal attitude towards the sailors and travellers. Custom duties were reduced or waived off in case of shipwrecks or trouble in the sea voyages. The *Naukadhakshya* was further empowered to destroy the pirate ships (*himsrika*) and rules of the *naukadhakshya* were bound to all the ships.²⁸ Passports (*mudra*) were needed for the merchants and foreign travellers, otherwise they were not allowed to disembark.²⁹

Arthasastra mentions about various people associated with boats and ships like the captain (*sasaka*), the pilot (*niryamaka*), oarsmen (*rasmigrahaka*) and balers (*utsechaka*). Although *Arthasastra* strictly enumerates charges for using ferry services but it further states that the charges were waived off for the wandering monks, *Brahmanas*, children and the old. It states that the ferry charges were much higher for crossing the big rivers and it was also required

for the ferrymen to maintain count of the boats and ships. In the *Mauryan* period, on account of prosperous trade and commerce, the state realized a good amount of customs duties and the Collectors of Customs and Tolls realized them with strictness.³⁰

Water Routes after 1st Century CE

During the 1st century CE, an intimate relationship persisted between trade, trade routes and the polity. The early century of Christian era witnessed the foundation of the Kushan empire encompassing the major part of central Asia, Western Asia and Northern Western India. Close relationship with the Roman empire was established, thereby, opening the grand silk route to the Indians. Gold coins from the Kushan era are found in good numbers indicating a flourishing trade.

Milindapanha, the Buddhist text, which is a compilation of dialogue between Greek king Menander and Buddhist monk Nagasena, refers to the great knowledge of the Indian sailors about navigable routes. It further enlightens us about important ancient ports located in *Vanga* (Bengal), *Sovira* (located in the mouth of River Indus), *Surattha* (perhaps Dvarka), *Kolapattana* (Sri Lanka), *Suvarnabhumi* (Thailand), *Takkola* (Malaya peninsula), etc. *Satavahana* dynasty emerged as a strong power in the Deccan by the 1st century CE. The *Nanaghat* inscription refers to the *Junnar* pass which opened the way to Konkan and thereby connecting Ujjain and Paithan up to Pataliputra. Travellers had to cross the rivers Narmada, Tapti and Ganges to travel by this route.

Prof. V.V. Mirashi³¹ has examined these coins and found that king Sri Yajna Satakarni issued these coins with the images of ships. Reverse side of the coins contains image of a double-mast ship below which there are fish and conch shell symbolizing sea voyages which were in full swing during the



Fig.6. *Satavahana* coins with Ship Designs

Satavahana period. Some coins have ship images with masts, ropes, sails, etc. Satavahana coins with ship imprints and the Roman coins found from Cholamandala indicate an intimate commercial relation between India and the Roman empire.

Kalyana in Western India was an important port and a big market town in Dakshinapatha and its importance has been stressed in the inscription of Junnar and Kanheri.³² But with gradual decline in the Roman trade, Ptolemy, the classical writer, perhaps purposely, omitted Kalyana and mentions Dhanyakataka in Krishna valley as an important trading centre. Dhanakataka or modern Amravati emerged as a the most prolific centre of Buddhism by the Satavahana period. Joys and perils of maritime travels are amply represented in the bas reliefs of Amaravati stupa. The following bas relief is showing the Buddhist monk seated with folded hands, carrying Lord Buddha relics to some other place/country.

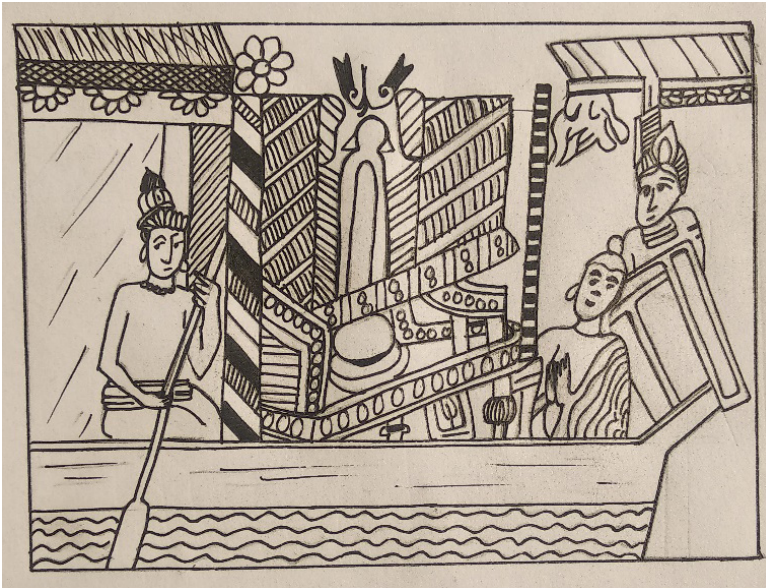


Fig.7. Bas relief from Amaravati

River Routes in Classical Literature

In the first two centuries of the Christian era, there was a flourishing trade between India and the Roman empire leading to a flourishing economy and development of towns and urban centres. *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* of the 1st century CE revealed the existence of a network of specialized trade which has changed a little around 2000 years later. Trade got a boost with the discovery of the monsoon winds supposedly by a Greek sailor Hippalus which substantially reduced the duration of the voyages between India and the Red Sea. *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mentions that the monsoon winds helped the ships to sail straight to the mouth of the river Indus. Rivers played an important role through which huge amount of locally produced commodities were brought to the ports for further export. *Periplus of the Erythraean*

Sea mentions a long list of commodities of trade.³³ Special mention may be mentioned of textiles of India. *Periplus* refers to best muslin as *Monache* and rough cotton as *Malochine*. Indian textiles even entered the Roman vocabulary as early as in 200 BCE, for example, *carbasina* has been used to refer to *karpasa*, a Sanskrit word denoting cotton.³⁴

Boats which plied on rivers also found mention in classical literatures. For local distances, rafts were common in South India, as we still find them in the backwaters of Kerala. Two boats were joined together with a cabin (*Periplus*, 60) and were known as *Sangar*. This primitive ship could withstand the lashings of waves quite efficiently. The bottom of these ships was flat and made up of planks sewn together by coconut fibres. The bas relief from Sanchi stupa probably corroborate to this type of boats.

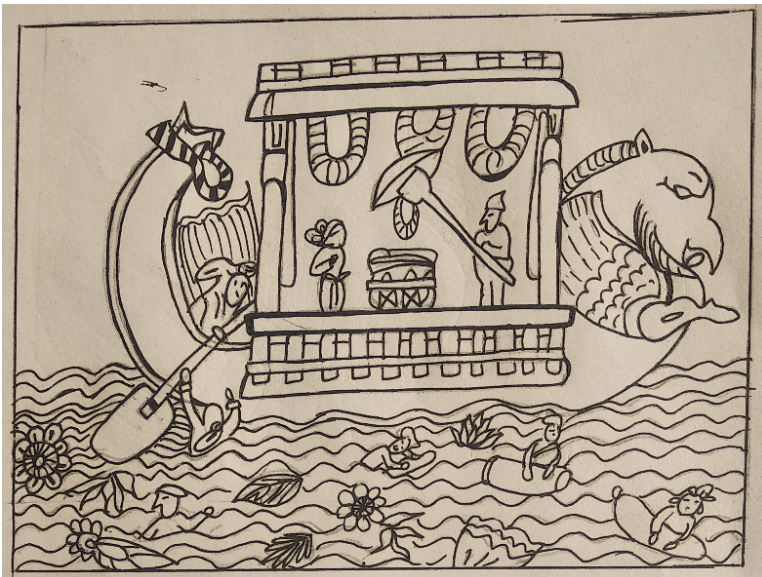


Fig.8. Primitive boat in Eastern Gate, Sanchi Stupa, 1st Century BCE

River Routes in Miscellaneous Sources

Jain literature also gives references to the boats that plied on rivers. These boats were regularly maintained and repaired. Jain literature mentions about bow (*purao*) and stern (*maggao*). Boatman's language has been also cited, for example, 'draw the boat onwards' (*sancharaesi*), 'draw back' (*ukkasittaeya*), 'push' (*atasilteya*), 'draw the rope' (*ahara*), etc.³⁵

Silappadikaram, *Manimekhalai*, the Sangam texts, refer to trade and trading networks of South India. Maritime trade brought immense wealth which led to the urbanisation in South India. Sea merchants had to depend on the river routes for the swift flow of commodities. Main commodities were black pepper, spices, muslins, precious stones, pearls, etc. which were traded to Rome. Kaveripattinam or Puharwas was situated in the northern bank of the river Kaveri through which ships sailed throughout the year. *Silappadikaram* writes that caravans through the land and river routes brought variety of commodities and it seemed that all the produce of the world were collected at Kaveripattinam.³⁶

Political stability of the Gupta period provided great impetus to trading activities. Trade and commerce along with guilds and banking system became further organized. Specific taxes and fares were stipulated for boats loaded with particular commodities. Fa Hien writes that he travelled through China, Central Asia and reached Mathura, then after crossing the river Ganges, he reached Saketa, Sravasti, Kapilavastu, Vaisali, Pataliputra, Rajagriha, Gaya and Varanasi. All of them were connected through river routes.³⁷

Banabhatta's *Harsacharita* refers to *Abhramanena Srisamakarshanena*, meaning "Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth is self-drawn by sea voyage".³⁸ A terracota seal found from Basarah depicts Sri Lakshmi standing on a boat symbolizing

great riches acquired through trade, mainly maritime (Chandra, 1977: 227).



Fig.9. Ships and boats in Ajanta Murals

In cave XVII of Ajanta, we find representations of boat. Shape of a boat is like a *Makara*³⁹ which probably indicated sea voyage. One boat is bowl shaped with stern and bow decorated with ring patterns. This boat probably plied on rivers.⁴⁰ The symbol of 'eye' might be symbolizing keeping a watch over waters or may be a sign of protection. However, this 'eye' as a symbol was commonly found in the south eastern ships as well.

A survey of the Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, Sanskrit, and other classical literature along with archaeological sources, sculptures and paintings corroborates to the presence of a vibrant riverine trade which contributed substantially to the economic prosperity of ancient India. We could see that many political powers were controlling the land, river and sea

routes in the ancient India. But despite the political turmoil, trade continued and water routes retained their importance. Thus, it is difficult to fathom the story of Indian history without acknowledging the due importance to the Indian ever flowing rivers, boatmen and sailors in the development of an indigenous trade which contributed directly to the growth, prosperity and proper distribution of economic resources among the people of the region.

Notes

1. Piggot, 1950, 93-94
2. Allchin, 1983, 186. Also see Jacobson, 1986, 157-8
3. Rao, 1962, 12
4. Kosambi, 1956, 57
5. Dales, 1965, 145-150
6. Mackay E., 1935, 197-198
7. Chandra, 1977, 40.
8. *Ibid.*, 42
9. *Ibid.*, 44
10. *Jatakas*, Vol. 3, 1964, 126-128
11. *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, 138-148
12. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 47
13. Mehta, 1970, 7
14. *Jatakas*, Vol. 2, op. cit., 127
15. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 111
16. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 239
17. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 423
18. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, 326
19. Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, Vol. 1, 1965, 55-56
20. *Manu*, Ch. XIII; also see Mookherjee, 1962, 42
21. Prasad, 1977, 29
22. Kautilya, *Arthashastra* Ch. II. 23
23. *Ibid*, IV, 2. 77; Buddha, 1962, 197
24. Prasad, op. cit., 111-112
25. Agrawal, 1982, 75
26. Kautilya, *Arthashastra* Ch. 28
27. Mookherjee, op. cit., 76

28. Mackey, 1948, 149
29. Kangle, 1960, 28
30. Chandra, op. cit., 82
31. Mirashi, 1945, 43-45
32. Chandra, op. cit., 103
33. Schoff, 1974, 227
34. Warmington, 1974, 45-46
35. Chandra, op. cit., 159
36. Parthasarathy, 1993, 92
37. Chandra, op. cit., 174
38. Chandra, op. cit., XV
39. Herringham, 1915, plate. 42
40. Griffith, 1896, 17

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3

Uncanny Indian Rivers in the British Mindset in Colonial India

Shaona Barik

Introduction

After the mutiny of 1857, there was an urgency on the part of the British to construct more number of administrative buildings in India and to improve modes of communications so as to intensify authoritative control over the Indians. Perhaps they thought that such constructions would elude the natives of India into believing that the British rule was perpetual. The mutiny of 1857 mainly spread along the trajectory of the Gangetic plains. Anxieties about another native rebellion, perhaps, compelled the British to connect those scattered areas along the Gangetic plains with the help of the railways so as to facilitate faster communication process during times of crisis. Perhaps the British thought that with the introduction of railways in such remote regions, it would be convenient for them to impose control and to dispel chances of native uprisings. "...the necessity for rapid railway expansion was also brought home by the events of

1857. As a result, railway construction received a boost in the years following 1857, and by 1890s most important trunk lines were laid” (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 8). Thereafter, the British were determined to rapidly expand the construction of bridges, dams, barrages etc. across the vast expanses of Indian rivers.

Making and Breaking: Futility of Mapping Indian Rivers

The rivers were mapped by the men of the Empire. Information on convenient methods of navigating rivers got incorporated in books accompanied by charts, diagrams, tables and so on. Such books also housed observations about bridges, important landmarks (like anchorage points, buoys), sources of fresh water in the rivers. For instance, the book, *The River Hooghly: Calcutta to Saugor Island with Charts and Diagrams* (1884) by master pilot S.R. Elson who served in Bengal Pilot Services, was commissioned by the government of Bengal for the convenience of navigating the river Hooghly. The book harbours unique tables of tides that occurred in the river, it contains observations on storm signals, channels and buoys along the river Hooghly. The “Preface” of the book clearly specifies the purpose of such a compilation. “This book is intended to afford an accessible source of information to persons who wish to qualify for an examination of the river. It has been carefully revised by the author and at the Port office to present date” (Elson, 1884: Preface). It was also the target of the men of the Empire to construct canals across the rivers of India for the purpose of irrigation of lands and to facilitate trade. Reports on the sustainability and suitability of constructing canals in certain areas on the rivers and annual cost required for the implementation of such projects (which

included bridges, dams as well) were often put together in the format of books. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Baird Smith, in the book *A Short Account of the Ganges Canal with a Description of Some of the Principal Works* (1870), mentioned how several constructions (executed by the men of the Empire) on the river Ganga would turn out to be beneficial for the people:

It constructed a great many new works upon them (existing canals), enlarged their channels so that they could hold much more water than before, built a great many bridges for travelers to cross over, dug Rajbuhas (Distributing channels) to carry the water to distant villages, and put them altogether in a state of efficiency. (Smith, 1870: 2)

The erratic course of rivers proved to be a real setback to the British men's endeavour to construct the Rajmahal canal across the Ganga in the middle of the 19th century. Rajmahal Canal Committee was officially formulated to inspect about the feasibility of the construction of the canal. The committee comprised chief engineers appointed by the authorities of the Empire. The report stated that the canal would benefit the people to a large extent, "...its construction could not fail of realizing benefits calculated progressively to increase, and early to give rise to other improvements, similarly tending to add to the agricultural and commercial resources of the country" (Macleod and Forbes, 1841: 29). Such reports were glossed over with various types of information about rivers. Mapping the rivers of India was of course a method of generating and gathering knowledge about them. Through that procedure, the British aspired to take the rivers under control, to make them manageable and fit for navigation. The men of the Empire were aware that their ability to navigate rivers would enable them to advance their commercial ventures in the colonies. Production of knowledge about rivers was definitely a part of the process of colonization.

British men working in civil and military departments of the Empire often complained about the deviations that occurred in the course of the river Ganga annually:

L.S.O. Malley who served as a district officer at the turn of the century, reports...As if to mock its image as an eternal river, some of the islands in the Ganges “become inhabited, cleared and cultivated. The population increases, large villages start up; the land revenue is collected for ten or twelve years; and then the whole fabric will disappear within one rainy season”. (Darian, 2001: 137)

Such incredible changes in the path of Indian rivers hindered construction works and gave rise to anxiety amongst the British. Rivers of India for them turned out to be fatal, unruly forces difficult to tame, a hindrance on the path of colonization. Indian rivers in their uncontrollable and frenzied avatar horrified the British to such an extent that they ended up thrusting the rivers with supernatural attributes. As part of the process of colonization, the British looked at Indian culture through the blinkers of Western rationality. They comprehended, essentialized, inferiorized and controlled the colonized “other”, often at the behest of setting derogatory stereotypes about anything associated with the Indians or their culture, even if that meant their rivers. The rivers occupied a position of sacredness in Indian culture. The natives of India considered the waters of their rivers as holy which was potent enough to cure diseases, purge their sins and so on. They still consider so.

Indian Rivers in the Project of Orientalism

During the late 18th century, a group of travellers arrived in India from Britain solely for the purpose of painting Indian landscapes. They adhered to the cult of the “picturesque”, which was in vogue back then and produced copious amounts

of drawings themed on Indian rivers. Some of those paintings deployed the tropes of romantic sublime and gothic fantasy in them¹. At times those paintings reflected repressed wishes, superfluous desires of individuals which the conventions of morality had subjugated. Those paintings reflected the fact that it was perhaps safe to situate such raw emotions and passions in the orient where they would not have been subjected to criticisms of any sorts. The orient in the British imagination was stereotyped and associated with mystery, magic, overt sexuality and excesses of all sorts. Indian rivers often got sketched in their tumultuous state in those paintings by the British artists, symbolizing the mysterious elements with which the British usually associated the Indian rivers.² Commotions and upheavals projected in such paintings could be symbolic representations of anxieties and isolation that the British faced upon coming in contact with the alien culture of India. Anxieties could have been about native uprising whose epicenter in 1857 was the ‘Gangetic Plains,’ or areas around rivers. For most of the British, India was the land of exile³ which tested and tried their mettle and capabilities of endurance. Life in remote regions of India could have led to isolation and cultural alienation.

In majority of the paintings about India by William Hodges, William Daniells, Thomas Daniells (all of whom were painting oriental sceneries during the late 18th and early 19th centuries), we usually get to observe the presence of ruinous sites (usually dilapidated temples or palaces) on the banks of rivers.⁴ Those paintings are mostly infused with tinges of darkness (overcast sky, tempestuous rivers etc. are characteristic features of such paintings) and portray the orient in the likeness of a timeless tableau frozen in time. Through such paintings the West’s stereotypical idea about the East or the Orient as the land of lost glory got disseminated. Such paintings fed into the Saidian project of

Orientalism, by virtue of which the West represented the East as a regressive terrain in order to impose control, dominate and devise effective strategies to rule over it:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institutions for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statement about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient.

(Said, 2001: 3)

To be able to control the movements of rivers (which was considered to be a part of the white man's burden) was also an attempt on the part of the colonizers to tame down the unfamiliar environment they encountered in foreign colonies. Such endeavours satiated the British' appetite for adventure and provided them the scope to take pride upon established notions about colonial masculinity⁵ and also upon the superiority of their race. "Often, in fact, this passion for control extended by necessity to the taming of the environment itself. The struggle against natural disasters, and the famine...was a primary concern of the Civil Service in the post-Mutiny period" (Wurgaft, 1983: 60). Often the turbulent Indian environment (which includes the rivers as well) in a state of flux unleashed from within the "morally upright men of the Empire" display fierce passion and repressed emotions. Such impulses often got suppressed, as the British men in India were required to follow the imperial code of masculinity. "Although the British insisted on the rigid control of their feelings, as well as of the environment, they perceived Indian culture as encouraging the display of violent or contradictory emotions. This contrast accounted for the strong lines of attraction and repulsion that linked the British to native India" (Wurgaft, 1983: 61).

Sanitizing Rivers, Recreating Home

The British perceived the Indian rivers in an ambiguous manner. Their imaginings about the rivers were extremely contradictory in nature. Teeming with people, dotted with religious sites, the Indian *ghats* for some British was the land of gaiety. Sidney Low, a British journalist working for the *Standard*, visited *Kumbh Mela* (annual fair held at Allahabad, when millions of pilgrims take a dip in the river Ganga as they believed it would cleanse their sins in this birth) in 1905. He was taken aback and amazed by the view of the river bank, “Religion, trade and amusement go hand in hand everywhere. The ground is dotted with tiny shrines and makeshift temples” (Jagmohan, 1984: 122). The river banks were also detested by several British for the accumulated filth and dirt⁶. Some considered the river banks to be the hub of diseases. The presence of naked, deformed *fakirs* on the river banks proved to be disturbing for some British, it was considered a jarring grotesque sight.

Alice Perrin, who accompanied her husband to India during the late 19th century, described the horror of a *memsahib* when she beheld a deformed *fakir* at the *Kumbh Mela* in the short story, “The Fakir’s Island” (Perrin, 1901: 133-140). Uncanny tales about Indian *fakirs* and *sadhus* inhabiting areas around Indian rivers got profusely circulated during this time. Alice Perrin’s novella *The Vow of Silence* (1920) focuses upon the mysterious attributes of the *fakirs* of India. A British fellow in the novella got attracted towards the *fakirs* to such extents that he decided to adopt their lifestyle. Perhaps the British imagined that the bewitching qualities of Indian rivers infused the *sadhus* with strange powers which even made the British revere them. An evidence of this phenomenon is the painting *The Fakeer’s Rock*⁷ which was repeatedly sketched by painters like Hodges and Thomas Daniell back then.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio described the *fakir's* rock (a *fakir* meditated on that rock for which the natives considered it as a holy site) at Jungheera, overlooking the river Ganga in one of his poems (Derozio, 1828: 5). In the British imagination, sites around Indian rivers got linked with mysterious and attractive powers, which were often uncanny in nature, made more profound by the presence of the *fakirs* and *sadhus*. To the British, the *fakirs* like the rivers of India, were symbols of the authentic East, or the “extreme orient,” often difficult to comprehend. In the British mindset, perhaps the *fakirs* as well as the rivers represented forces which were resistant to colonization and difficult to tame. At the same time, the British often considered the *fakirs* and rivers as sources of alluring mystery whose charm was irresistible. Several British in India conformed and succumbed to their magical powers.

The British demeaned India as a land of idolatry since age old times⁸. The temples on the bank of the rivers provided enough succor to nurture this idea. Gradually the river banks in the British mindset got associated with idolatry, where superstitions were abounding. That was also a way in which the British trivialized the faiths of the natives of India. Christian missionaries were commissioned to tour for several months along the rivers of India. Their job was to bring about the conversion of the natives of India into Christian faith. They disembarked on river banks where it was believed that idolatry was profuse and they preached from the Bible. In a particular Christian tract,⁹ entitled *The Missionary on the Ganges; or What is Christianity?* (1856) by Mrs. Mullens, we observe how a missionary was appointed to travel along the course of the Ganga with his family in a residential boat for almost a year. They travelled in their boat all night before arriving at their destination in the morning. The boat remained tied to an anchorage throughout the morning and the missionary, loyal to his office of duty, went

out to preach. The same schedule was followed for the entire period of the missionary's appointment to his post. Once, in the aforementioned tract, the missionary's wife, while inside her houseboat, glanced at the river Ganga and said, "We are Christians, we are anxious that the heathen in India should cast away their idols and embrace Christianity, for we believe that is the only religion that can save their souls" (Mullens, 1856: 13). While in their endeavour to colonize, the British attempted to cleanse the Indian rivers and their surrounding areas so that they could interpret those sites from the vantage point of Western rationality. They were eager to claim those land and impose their tradition upon it. One of the reasons was also to eradicate the cultural practices of the natives as well. They, perhaps, deployed Christianity to sanitize the banks of Indian rivers which they considered to be the cradle of idolatry and superstitions of various sorts. To the British, the areas around Indian rivers represented the authenticity of Indian culture which remained untainted by Western influences. Banks of rivers in India were usually crowded with people as several religious sites were situated there. During the fairs, the rivers' banks were flooded with people; chances of native uprising on those areas were also strong due to the gathering of native people in masses on those locations around the rivers. This factor, perhaps, could have led to the development of anxieties amongst the British, they feared native rebellion (the epicenter of the mutiny of 1857 was the Gangetic plains) and also a kind reverse colonization since many of the British were besotted by Indian rivers.

The project of appropriating the Indian rivers and making them comprehensible according to the standardized conventions of Western rationality often required a complete physical makeover of the river '*ghats*'. The British constructed taverns, hotels, residential bungalows, sailors' home, sanitorium on the banks of Indian rivers. One of

the purposes of such attempt was to recreate the home, a place which would resemble the bank of the river Thames and would thus remind them of England. The painting, *The View of Calcutta from the Garden Reach* (1810), drawn and engraved by William Daniell provides a sanitized (according to the conventions of western morality) view of the river Hooghly. Bright colours have been used here unlike the dark shades used in other sketches to portray the rivers in its tumultuous state. In this painting we get to see sprawling whitewashed mansions planned and organized around the river, highlighting the fact that the area has been tamed, claimed and colonized by the British. The places around Indian rivers for some British were polluting and defiling; they abhorred the sight of the *sadhus* on the bank of rivers and detested the stench. One of the reasons for such hatred was obviously because those sites were preserver of authentic native culture — often difficult to control because of the swarming presence of several religious shrines which were sacred to the natives.

The Indian rivers' banks were used as cremation grounds; corpses were often directly disposed of into the rivers as part of the rituals by the natives of India. The sight of smoke emanating from burning dead bodies, stench spreading from half rotten corpses might have disgusted the British. It might have generated horror and anxiety. The plots of uncanny tales that the British produced in India or even translated from Indian languages were thus at times appropriately situated on the banks of rivers.¹⁰ Various kinds of rituals (involving incantations, ceremonies) performed on the river banks by the Indians were categorized as magical and mysterious by the British. They were usually afraid of native cultural practices which they were unable to comprehend. As a result of which they often did not hesitate to devise strategies to rubbish off such native customs as mere superstitions.

The Lure of Indian Rivers: Going Native

The British in India were simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the Indian rivers. If the Indian rivers led to revulsion and disgust amongst them, some of them were so immensely fascinated by the rivers that they either craved to take a dip in the rivers occasionally¹¹ or even “went native.” Charles Stuart, also known as “Hindoo Stooart”, who worked as an Army Officer of the East India Company regularly bathed in the river Ganga early at dawn wearing the sacred thread of initiation. Major part of his life was spent in Calcutta, he died in 1828. Daily at dawn, he used to walk from the place of his residence in Calcutta to the nearest river *ghat*. He even performed rituals like the chanting of hymns to the river Ganga in Sanskrit before taking a dip in the river. Charles Stooart went native overtly; his cemetery at South Park Street, Calcutta was built in the likeness of a temple whose walls were adorned with the idols of Indian gods and goddesses. One of the prominent idols engraved on Charles Stooart’s memorial (at the cemetery) was the figurine of the river goddess Ganga (Shreepantha, 2013: 102-106). The lure of the Indian rivers often made some British defy the norms of Victorian morality. They ended up questioning and shattering the principles of enlightenment rationality upon which the British Empire was founded. They failed to adhere to the strict codes of colonial masculinity¹² (sanctioned and justified by Christian dogmas) which they were required to follow for the functioning of the Empire. For some of the British in India, the Indian rivers, perhaps, symbolized the mystical qualities of the East which they praised and set in contrast to the materialistic West.

Loss of Rationality, Flow of Uncanny Tales

Several uncanny stories about Indian rivers by the British got produced during the late 19th century. In Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Bridge Builders" (Kipling 1898: 3-50), first published in *Illustrated London News*, Christmas Number, 1893, we observe how the efforts of the engineer Findlayson, who was hired by the Empire's Public Works Department to construct a bridge over the river Ganges, received constant setbacks. The rivers flooded and deterred his determination to carry on with the construction work.¹³ In an opium-induced trance, he dreamt of Indian gods discussing about how the sacred river can never be bridged. Native superstitions often meddled with the endeavour of the British to carry on with construction works across the span of India.¹⁴ Through this tale we see how the British in India, while trivializing native superstitions and stamping their rituals as derogatory proofs of idolatry, had actually at times ended up succumbing to those beliefs. The mysterious lure of India was difficult for some of them to resist. In this story the mystical aspects of the East have been glorified to criticize the West almost in the likeness of the "affirmative orientalist"¹⁵. From the story it is evident that the Indian rivers threatened a process of reverse colonization amongst the British.

Fear of a native rebellion post the mutiny of 1857 loomed large at the back of the minds of the British for the rest of their period of stay in India. Haunted by anxieties of native uprising, Kipling composed the tale "The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes" (Kipling 1888: 41-65), which was first published in *Quartette* (1885). The mysterious, magical qualities of Indian rivers get highlighted when Jukes, a British civil engineer, finds himself trapped inside a crater on a dry river bed. The Indian rivers to the British were incomprehensible, thus they often thrust supernatural attributes upon the rivers. Jukes

inside the crater underwent miserable experiences when the emaciated living dead population comprising Indians forced him to lead life in squalor.

For the British, Indian rivers also represented sites of bloodshed, violence and murders. Official reports, eye witness accounts of the massacre of the Europeans in the hands of the Indian mutineers or *sepoys* state how the Europeans were butchered and killed when they attempted to flee in boats across the rivers during the native uprising of 1857. Rivers turned out to be sites of contestations; the British associated the rivers with their defeat and native rebellion. A report while condemning the violence inflicted by the natives upon the Europeans declared, “When we got to the river the enemy began firing on us, killed all the gentlemen and some of the ladies, set fire to the boats; and some were drowned, and we were taken prisoners and taken to a home, put all in one room” (Anonymous, 1858: 89). Traumatic experiences suffered by the British when they were victimized by the native mutineers or *sepoys* during their flight across the rivers perhaps got etched profoundly in their memories which in turn might have generated their fear of rivers and thus could have led to the production of uncanny tales about rivers.

Cultural exchanges (assimilation took place as result of which) with Indians often enabled the British to transgress the threshold of conventional norms of Western rationality which had led to their subjugation in several ways. Through their belief in Indian native superstitions and uncanny lores, they were perhaps able to unleash their repressed psyche and question the authoritative principles of Victorian morality. The mystical, strange and mysterious rivers of India also provided the fodder for some British to question the delimitating principles of Western rationality. Stories about strange water bodies which charmed and haunted the British

in India were also penned down by Rudyard Kipling, Alice Perrin etc.¹⁶ They focused upon the idea of the return of the repressed; whatever was supposed to have remained hidden returned back and caused haunting.¹⁷ In other words, the return of repressed feelings, guilt, desires on the part of the British, which symbolically got projected upon the rivers of India, generated uncanny feelings. The stories prove that the sanctioned codes of Victorian morality had perhaps repressed the British. That their repressed feeling in the unconscious psyche resurfaced itself symbolically and got projected upon the rivers, which in turn generated “uncanniness” and caused the haunting. Sigmund Freud interpreted dreams of water as manifestations of repressed sexual or libidinal energy¹⁸ in the unconscious.

Loneliness of the British in remote cantonments of India led to the birth of anxieties and fear, which caused haunting. It, perhaps, led to lurid imagining of all sorts which gave rise to fear and feeling of the uncanny. Cultural alienation often forced them to immerse themselves in different kinds of addictions. Findlayson’s opium-induced dream in the story “The Bridge Builders,” (Kipling 1898: 3-50) could have been the result of complete alienation and the subsequent generation of fear. If Victorian morality restricted the British in almost all spheres of life, India and other far-flung colonies of the Empire provided them the opportunity to fulfil or express their repressed wishes.¹⁹ Ideals about British masculinity were constructed to assert the racial superiority of the British. But British men’s contact with unknown, uncanny, mysterious forces in India often led to the shattering of constructed Victorian ideals which the men of the Empire had internalized. The rule of the Empire further got problematized because of the aforementioned reasons.

Assimilation and Appropriation of Local Lore about Indian Rivers

Cultural exchanges between Britain and India facilitated a process of assimilation which influenced the tales produced by the British in India during the 19th century. Bengali folktales about ghosts and spirits inhabiting various parts/objects of the environment like trees, rivers, ponds were quite popular. “The chief feature of a Bengali ghost is most certainly his/her out of the home location. Trees are a great favorite as are marshes, ponds and forests” (Bhattacharya, 2009: 146). Lore about *Sheekol Buri*,²⁰ ghosts of women who met with untimely or mysterious deaths in rivers were/are a part of Bengali repository of folktales. The project of Orientalism also involved translation and circulation of indigenous folktales of Indian origin by the British. Curiosity about Indian culture combined with the urge to extract, appropriate and eradicate native knowledge systems made the British take profound interest in the project of translating Indian folktales.²¹ One might also recollect at this juncture the British interest in the “native Gothic” stories about *baitaals* (disembodied spirits that tend to enter into and animate dead bodies), *churails* and *daayans* (witches) that can be seen in Richard F. Burton’s translation of the *Baital Pachisi*, an 11th century Indian text as *Vikram and the Vampire, Or Tales of Hindu Devilry* in 1870.

The Folk Lore Society was established in the latter half of the 19th century in London for the purpose of amassing alternative local knowledge inherent in folktales collected from across the world²² with special focus upon the lore gathered from the colonies. Grasp over alternative native knowledge systems from the colonies was after all essential for the purpose of controlling and dominating the colonized “other”. The British could have imbibed the fear of native ghosts inhabiting rivers and water bodies from the translated

versions of the Indian folk tales which got published profusely during the late 19th century. The fact that they imagined the rivers as uncanny could have been the result of the influence of those native folk tales which they translated into English.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the British were determined to subjugate and impose control over the natives of India, but on the other hand some of them yielded to and were intensely impacted by alternative native knowledge systems enfolded within Indian folktales, which ultimately led to the questioning of the motive of Western rationality. Their sheer belief in ghosts and spirits of India could have led to the shattering of Victorian code of conduct which they were strictly required to follow. Tales of encountering ghosts in India were at times used as tokens by the British to break free from the shackles of morality and question the policies of the Empire. Faith upon alternative knowledge systems as discovered by the British in Indian folklore could have contributed to the process of cultural assimilation as well. Further cultural assimilation is a dialectical process, as a result of which plots of the Bengali tales (written in Bengali language) about haunted rivers got inspired or were at times adapted from the prevalent repository of English tales with similar themes (some of those tales were direct translations of Indian folk tales) set in India by the British during the 19th century.²³

Notes

1. The painting entitled, "View of Esplanade, Calcutta, from Garden Reach" (1785) by William Hodges portrays this idea distinctly. We get to see dark clouds rolling above the river and dilapidated houses at the backdrop. The painting definitely evokes the theme of romantic sublime, and strands of gothic elements are clearly

visible. The painting “Shevagurly” (1804) by Thomas and William Daniell (which is the picture of a river scene) is another example of a painting which highlights the aspect of romantic sublime. The painting “Ramgur” (1804) by Thomas and William Daniell incorporated in the collection *Oriental Scenery* caters to the genre of the gothic sublime. “Thomas Daniell and his nephew William Daniell, arrived in India early in 1786. They spent about seven years travelling extensively along the Ganga and elsewhere in India. They built up a large stock of drawings in the course of their travels, and on return to England embarked on making aquatints of their celebrated *Oriental Scenery*, a truly great enterprise published in six parts of twenty four views each between 1795 and 1808” (Jagmohan, 1984: 41).

2. The painting, “The Military Orphan House, Howrah” (1787) by Thomas Daniell depicts the river in a state of turbulence. We get to see an overcast sky and rolling waters in the river.
3. “For much of the nineteenth century, the sense of exile and of doing one’s duty with suffering remained — it is everywhere in Kipling’s Indian work — and it sometimes expressed with almost pathological melancholy” (Edwardes, 1967: 173).
4. Thomas Daniell sketched a broken palace on the bank of the river in the painting entitled, “Ruined Palace on the Banks of the Ganges, Ghazipur, U.P.” (1791). Another typical example of a painting which belongs to this genre is, “The Ruins of Prince Shuja’s Palace at Rajmahal, Bihar” (1785) by William Hodges. The painting contains images of the ruins of a palace situated on the bank of a river. The painting “State Barges on the River Gomati” (1810) by Thomas Daniell depicts a broken temple on the bank of a river whose waters are dark. The sky is overcast with clouds. The tempestuous scene heralds the onset of heavy torrential rainfall. Several sketches revolving around the same theme got painted during this time.
5. See: Mrinalini Sinha, *Manliness: A Victorian Ideal and Colonial Policy in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Stony Brook: State University of New York, 1988).
6. Mark Twain reached Bombay in 1896. He was amazed to discover how the Indians considered river water as potable. He abhorred the sight of filth and floating corpses in the rivers (Jagmohan, 1984: 143).

7. The Fakir's rock was a landmark situated in the Bhagalpur district just beside the river. Thomas Daniell made a sketch of the Fakir's rock in 1800, it can be found in the collection *Oriental Scenery*. The sacred value of the Fakir's rock amongst the Indians was recognized by a painter like William Hodges in the collected volume of his travelogue, *Travels in India During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782 and 1783* (See: Hodges, 1793:45-46).
8. Letitia Elizabeth Landon never visited India but she wrote a fascinating poem entitled "Hurdwar: A Place of Hindoo Pilgrimage," in 1860. In the poem she compared the rituals performed by the Hindus on the bank of the river Ganga to savage rites. She claimed that the Indians practiced idolatry unabashedly. It is interesting to note how the British had internalized certain ideas about the orient without ever having actually visited the places physically. For some of them idolatry was abound on the bank of Indian rivers (See: Landon, 1860, "Hurdwar: A Place of Hindoo Pilgrimage").
9. Mainly written by the British for the purpose of preaching the values of Christian faith to the natives of India. Their target was to subsequently bring about the conversion of the Indians to Christianity. They were commissioned by different Christian associations to take up such kinds of projects. The tracts were often written in the form of fictions and aimed at glorifying the toil of the missionaries.
10. Richard F. Burton translated *Baitaal Paichisi* into English in 1870. The title of the tale was translated as, *Vikram and the Vampire or Tales of Hindu Devilry*. Most of the uncanny tales in that volume described an eerie river scene to create an ambience of mystery and fear. For example, "The air was filled with shrill and strident cries, with the fitful moaning of the storm-wind, with the hooting of the owl...and with the hoarse gurgling of the swollen river, from whose banks the earth slip and thundered in its fall" (Burton, 1870: 42).
11. "Count Hermann Keyserling, the famous German thinker, who travelled extensively all over India immediately before the first World War, has expressed his enchantment with the city (Benaras) in metaphysical terms..." he wrote in his travel book, *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*, "I feel inclined, like the pilgrims on the Ganges, to sink down every morning before it in fervent gratitude for it is immeasurable what it gives me. I feel nearer here than I have

ever done to the heart of the world; here I feel everyday as if soon, perhaps even today, I would receive the grace of supreme revelation” (Jagmohan, 1984: 80).

12. Colonial masculinity was a code of conduct which the British men serving the Empire were required to follow. It glorified the cult of the physically strong men. Qualities of bravery, courage and endurance of the British men in the tropics got appraised and appreciated. It was an honor for the British man to be a martyr while serving under the imperial crown. In the 19th century while England was expanding its colonies overseas, boys at schools like Eaton, Harrow and Oxford were trained to develop interests in games and sports of various sorts which would help them to nurture their physical faculties. Apart from physical training, their zeal for adventure got cultivated and encouraged in those schools.
13. In the context of Kipling’s story, “The Bridge Builders”, “Contemporary reviewers were quick to spot the symbolism and allegory: ‘The spanning of the Ganges is not merely an engineering achievement: it stands for a type of the losing battle which the old gods of the East fight against new and spiritual forces’ (*Macmillan’s Magazine*)” (Norman Page, *A Kipling Companion*, London, PAPERMAC, 1989, 72).
14. “Native superstitions seemed often to encroach on the efforts at practical reform in the 1870s and 1880s: projects such as road construction, famine relief, improvement of sanitary facilities to control the spread of diseases” (Wurgaft, 1983: 57).
15. Richard King in his book *Orientalism and Religion* described a category of orientalism which he named “Affirmative Orientalism”. “Inden’s work, however, is interesting for his critical analysis of ‘affirmative Orientalism’. This strand of Orientalist discourse, labelled ‘romantic’ by Inden because of its indebtedness to European Romanticism, is generally motivated by an admiration for, and sometimes by a firm belief in the superiority of, Eastern cultures. The romantic image of India portrays Indian culture as profoundly spiritual, idealistic and mystical” (King, 1999: 92). Affirmative orientalism dealt with the aspect of visualizing and imagining the East as a passive, spiritual land. Marked by a sympathetic attitude towards Indian culture, the writing of the affirmative orientalists admired the ethical and moral values embedded within eastern religions.

16. Rudyard Kipling's short story "Bubbling Well Road," which first got published in *Civil and Military Gazette* in 1888 describes how a British officer out on a hunting expedition discovers a mysterious well in the midst of jungle which the natives considered to have been haunted. He could hear strange, uncanny sounds emerging out of the well (See: Kipling, *Life's Handicap Being Stories of My Own People* 316-320). In Alice Perrin's novel *The Waters of Destruction* (1905), a British Civilian got attracted to the soothing murmur of a stream in India. He agreed with the natives' belief in worshipping the stream as an incarnation of the Indian goddess Kali. The stream enchanted him and made him have faith upon native superstitions (See: Perrin, *The Waters of Destruction*).
17. Freud stated in the essay "The Uncanny" (1919) that which gets repressed in the unconscious parts of our brains often manifests itself in the form of the uncanny (See: "The Uncanny (1919)" by Sigmund Freud, trans. Alix Strachey).
18. See: Sigmund Freud, *Interpreting Dreams*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006).
19. "Under the stress of accumulating social and political agitation, the conflicts internalized by the British were threatened with diffusion into more primitive fantasies, fantasies that promised fulfillment of omnipotent wishes that had been repressed, compromised and sublimated. Indian culture — with its superstitions, magical rites, emotional excesses represented to the British a series of "regressed" images; this intense fear formed the center of a dialectic that linked Indian and British life. It lent emotional force to the argument for authoritarian policies. Some of these fantasies concerned the images of total fulfillment or total destruction embodied in the gods and demons of Indian culture. Others are related to libidinal or aggressive drives" (Wurgaft, 1983: 68).
20. We come across the spirit of *Sheekol Buri* in Bengali folktales. It means the spirit of women who died unnatural deaths in rivers. Ghosts of women who committed suicide (usually having been betrayed in love or pregnant with a bastard child) by drowning themselves in rivers or those whose dismembered bodies were thrown into rivers after murder or those who accidentally got killed in rivers were thought to have haunted the site of their death, which is the river (See: Majumder, 1907, *Thakurmar Jhuli*).
21. Some examples of volumes of Indian folktales translated into English and published in the 19th century are: Rev. Lal Behari

Day's *Folk-Tales of Bengal*, in one of the stories in this volume, titled "The Story of the Rakshasas," a rakshasi, or a witch could assume different shapes on the river-side (Day, *Folk-Tales of Bengal* 69); Mary Stokes' *Indian Fairy Tales*, in this volume we come across the story of a mythical river snake who wept like human beings (Stokes, 1880, 54); F.A. Steel and R.C. Temple's *Wide-Awake Stories. A Collection of Tales told by Little Children, between Sunset and Sunrise, in the Panjab and Kashmir*; M. Frere's *Old Deccan Days or Hindoo Fairy Legends Current in Southern India*; R.C. Temple's *The Legends of the Panjab* ; Shaikh Chilli's *Folk-Tales of Hindustan* and so on. Such translations perhaps influenced the ghost stories the British wrote, which further could have triggered their fears about Indian rivers.

22. The Folk Lore Society (FLS) was established in London during 1878. It catered to the study of folktales and traditional culture from different regions across the world. The society took special interest in engaging with folk lore from the colonies of England. The aim was to translate as many folktales as possible from native tongue into the English language.
- 23 Bengali short story, "Arok", first published in 1956 by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, is an example of one such tale which got inspired from the stories by the Englishmen about the haunted Indian rivers. This tale is replete with overtones of English culture which apparently the Indians had adopted or imbibed during the nineteenth century. The story is about an Indian man who witnessed strange half human half swan like spirits of women on the bank of a river in India. Those spirits thronged to bathe in the river; when the man (who saw them) and out of lust tried to get hold of them, they flew away. After the episode, as if under a magical spell, the man was driven to eccentricity (See: Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, "Arok" in *Bibhutibhushan Rachanabali*, 1956: 248-253).

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4

Rabindranath Tagore

Rivers and the Discourse of Power

Subir Dhar

Introduction

Writing in his book *Power: A Philosophical Analysis*, Peter Morriss makes the pertinent observation that “whilst many events can be described as an exercise of power, we should only use the vocabulary of power if we are interested specifically in the *capacity* for producing events of this sort, and not if we are just interested in the events themselves” (2002: 22, emphasis in original). This is a salutary corrective given the fact that what seems to arrest the notice of the individual journalist, literary writer or even the occasional theorist in the contemporary Western world seems to be instances and locations of the immediate fall-outs of power, whether the Holocaust, or Stalinism, or Vietnam, or 9/11. What is often to be found largely missing in works of literature, in say a novel like DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), is any kind of engagement with a reflection on the nature of power. Arguably, just such an investigation of the idea of power may be noticed in several places in Tagore’s markings on rivers, in his poems and fiction, and particularly in his discursive texts, essays,

various addresses, and philosophical writings which will be the specific focus of this chapter.

River Consciousness in Tagore

Not that Tagore was uninterested in the ‘events’ of rivers themselves, for throughout his vast oeuvre he not only described rivers but also held them to be central to his thoughts and as a key to his realizations about *existence* and *being* in general. Yet, he was insistent about what may be called the transversal and avulsionary power of rivers, the idea that the force majeure of a moving volume of water was something that was transcendental of the limits of human power embodied through set social, economic or political institutions and borders or imaginings of national identities. Tagore recognized rivers as sites of power capable of affecting the lives of individuals living in close proximity to them and depending on them for their lives or livelihood. There is a clear sighting, too, on the part of Tagore that rivers may be forces which can exercise unrestrained power over the physical bodies of men, affect their well being or workings, shape their very lives and deaths. It is a characteristic feature of power relations, wrote Foucault (albeit in a different context), that power “separates the individual, breaks his link with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way” (Foucault, 1982:781). In a very cogent sense, this is precisely what is indicated about rivers in several of Tagore’s fictions.

It is a well-known fact that Tagore’s familiarity with riparian Bengal came about with his taking up, at the behest of his father Debendranath Tagore, the management of the family’s *zamindari* estates in the districts of Birahimpur, Kaligram and Sajadpur (all the three places are now in the present-day Bangladesh). This, after a former childhood

visit, was his second coming to the land on the banks of the river Padma. But now compelled to take up residence there, Tagore often preferred to live (and write) in the large and comfortable family houseboat which he had brought from its anchorage in the river Hooghly in Kolkata. In this vessel, Tagore often sailed up the Ichhamati, Baral and Atrai rivers for his *zamindari* works. Impressions of these are reflected in many of his short stories, poems, and particularly in the letters he wrote to his niece Indira Devi from 1888 to 1895, literary epistles that were to be later published as *Chinnapatra*.

Rivers and the Discourse of Power in Tagore

In commenting on what may be called Tagore's river consciousness, William Radice has commented that to Tagore, "The river is a symbol of the spirit that impels 'All thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things' — through human life as much as through the natural, non-human world" (Radice, 1994: 41). It may be said, however, that this is a somewhat simplistic assessment of a complex issue, for rivers were far more to Tagore than an expression of a quasi-Wordsworthian pantheistic power (as suggested by the oft quoted verse from Wordsworth's long Romantic lyric *Tintern Abbey*). Tagore's sighting of rivers and their power may in fact be better understood if we remember Michel Foucault speaking about how:

For some people, asking questions about the "how" of power would limit them to describing its effects without ever relating those effects either to causes or to a basic nature. It would make this power a mysterious substance which they might hesitate to interrogate in itself, no doubt because they would prefer not to call it into question. By proceeding this way, which is never explicitly justified, they seem to suspect the presence of a kind of fatalism.

(Foucault, 1982: 785)

Nevertheless, Foucault also draws attention to the presupposition that power “is something which exists with three distinct qualities: its origin, its basic nature, and its manifestations” (Foucault, 1982: 785). The manifestation of the power of rivers is especially evident in the short-stories that Tagore wrote. In fiction after short fiction, the river is indicated as a site of social negotiations, economic activity, individual aspirations, separations and reunions, and not infrequently as a potent agency of death-causation. In one of the first short stories which Tagore wrote, a tale called “Nadir Ghat” (“The River Stairs”) in which the narrator is a flight of steps leading down to the river; the human protagonist, a young widow who falls in love with a *sanyasi* commits suicide by drowning herself in the Ganga. The last lines of the story read: “The moon set; the night grew dark. I heard a splash in the water. The wind raved in the darkness, as if it wanted to blow out all the stars of the sky” (Tagore, 2013: 267). In another story, “The Child’s Return”, a monsoon-rain swollen river swallows up an infant and sets in train a series of events stained with tragic consequences. The lines in context read:

But the fact that he had been forbidden to go near the water immediately attracted the boy’s mind away from the *kadamba*-flowers and towards the water. He saw it gurgling and swirling along, as if a thousand wavelets were naughtily, merrily escaping to a forbidden place beyond the reach of some mighty Raicharan. The boy was thrilled by their mischievous example. He gently stepped down from his chair, and edged his way to the water. Picking a long reed, he leant forward, pretending the reed was a fishing-rod: the romping gurgling wavelets seemed to be murmuring an invitation to the boy to come and join their game.

There was a single plopping sound, but on the bank of the Padma river in monsoon spate many such sounds can be heard. Raicharan had filled the fold of his dhoti with *kadamba*-flowers. Climbing down from the tree, he made his way back towards

the push-chair, smiling – but then he saw that the child was not there. Looking all around, he saw no sign of him anywhere. His blood froze: the universe was suddenly unreal – pale and murky as smoke. A single desperate cry burst from his breaking heart: ‘Master, little master, my sweet, good little master!’ But no one called out ‘Channa’ in reply, no childish mischievous laugh came back. The Padma went on rushing and swirling and gurgling as before, as if it knew nothing and had no time to attend to the world’s minor occurrences. (Radice, 1994: 83)

Instances like these can be multiplied, but it is not only in fiction that such evocations of rivers can be found. In several of Tagore’s lyrics riverine power is of a gentle and intimate order as it is here in the first eight lines of one of the poet’s simplest of poems in his *Sahaj Path* (*Easy Reader*), a text written for the education of primary school children:

Our little river flows in graceful loops
The summer heat dries her up to a gentle flow,
Both cart and cattle travel across with ease
Her banks are high, her depths are shallow.

The sand bed glitters, no trace of mud
The far bank shimmers with Kash flowers white,
Where flocks of mynas chirp busily all day,
And jackal calls arise at night.

(Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. XV, 448.
English translation: <https://animikha.wordpress.com>)

Seen in one way, what is defined in this part-translation of the whole twenty-two-line lyric is the status of a power the singular economy of which is associated with soft amenability and a spirit of harmony conjoined if not equated with a sense of beauty. However, lest we are lulled into critical inattention by the limpid simplicity of these verses, it is important to point out that there are at least three orders of reality — and coterminous manifests of power — indicated by, and through, these verses. The first of these is that of the gentle flow of

the water in the river, a kinetics, the softness of which is dependent on the greater power of the controlling agency of the two seasons — summer and (presumably) monsoon. Next, there is the suggestion of an impelling human volition (and power) suggested by the easy crossing over the river by the “cart[/s]”. Finally, there are the animals — both of the tame, domesticated, and the wild kind — which are indicated by the references to “cattle” and “jackal[s]” respectively. To these human and animal dominants, the little river posits little or no counter-resistance but rather allows an “ease” of passage: “Both cart and cattle travel across with ease.” We are even informed in this lyric that the river is not only “graceful” and “gentle” but that it is non-threatening to human and animal life. Its “high” banks effectively preclude possibilities of flowing-over or floods, and its “shallow” depths render chances of death by drowning unlikely. Instead, the margins of the river amount to being a hospitable habitat for birds and beasts over the course of both day and night. But this is not all, since the river’s cleanliness and clarity are averred to an almost symbolic proportion as it is specifically stated that the water in it flows over a bed of glittering sand that is devoid of mud. The projection of this little river, in other words, is done in terms of a projection of a realm of pristine innocence that is devoid of any trace of the aggrandizement that so often accompanies power. And even in the later lines of this lyric, Tagore talks of the linkage between the river and the mango and *tal* groves on the banks of the river, of its coexistence with the rural habitations beside it, of its relationship with children who bathe in its waters and with the village wives who do their washing and occasionally catch small fish in their *sari*-ends. These vignettes of a happy coexistence between river and human beings reach a peak when the river flows in spate during the rainy season. As the now murky waters rush along in whirling eddies during the

monsoon, there rouses, writes Tagore, a festive mood in the villages that lie along the banks of the river.

Writing in a different context on the notion of power, the European social scientist Stefano Guzzini makes the point that the idea of power “implies an idea of counterfactuals; i.e., it could also have been otherwise” (Guzzini, 2005: 511). The counterfactual to the lyric “Our Little River” is instanced by Tagore’s poem “Kopai” in the volume *Punascha* (1991). Here there is a contrast marked between the mighty Padma and the little Kopai river that still runs near the poet’s abode in Santiniketan. Of the wide, extensive and powerful river Padma, Tagore writes:

The whole village stands shuddering in constant fear of the
heartless stream
The proud river has her name in the venerable texts; through
her veins runs the sacred current of the Ganges.
She remains remote. The homesteads she passes by are tolerated
by her, not recognized;
her stately manner has a response in it to the majestic silence
of the mountain and the large loneliness of the sea.

(Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali* Vol. VIII, 233.
English translation: <https://tagoreweb.in/Verses/poems-198/idly-my-mind-follows-the-3814>)

Unlike the little river of the earlier lyric in which the river had been given an integration with not only the pulses of quotidian life but equally with the living world of nature through the reference to the *kash* flowers (which appear in the *Sarat* season just before the Durga Puja in the month of September-October) and the mynah-birds as well as the human and the animal, the Padma is painted in the tints of the grand. It is “proud” and “heartless” like an imperial and authoritarian presence, and the village people who live close to its forceful currents are said to live in “fear” of it. It has also a “sacred” lineage and it keeps aloof and distant and is

disdainful of the humans and their habitations spread along its banks. The whole is a depiction cast in the aura of the sublime, of “the majestic silence of the mountain and the large loneliness of the sea” (op cit).

Only, after this in the same lyric of *Punascha*, there comes an evocation of the small river, Kopai near the poet’s own abode — Santiniketan:

I have for my neighbour the tiny river Kopai.
 She lacks the distinction of ancient lineage. The primitive name
 of hers
 is mixed up with the loud-laughing prattle of the Santal women
 of countless ages.
 There is no gap for discord between the land and water in her
 intimacy with the village,
 and she easily carries the whisper of her one bank to the other.
 The blossoming flax field is in indulgent contact with her as
 are the young shoots of rice.
 Where the road comes to an abrupt break at the brink of her
 water,
 she graciously makes way for the passers-by across her crystal-
 clear garrulous stream.
 Her speech is the speech of the humble home, not the language
 of the learned.
 Her rhythm has a common kinship both with the land and
 the water;
 her vagrant stream is unjealous of the green and golden wealth
 of the earth.
 Slender is her body that glides in curves across shadows and
 lights, clapping hands in a tripping measure.
 In the rains her limbs become wild like those of the village
 girls drunk with the mahua wine,
 yet she never even in her wantonness breaks or drowns her
 neighbouring land;
 only with a jesting whirl of her skirt sweeps the banks while
 she runs laughing loud.
 By the middle of autumn her waters become limpid, her current
 slim, revealing the pallid glimpse of the sands underneath.
 Her destitution does not shame her, for her wealth is not

arrogant, nor her poverty mean.
They carry their own grace in their different moods,
even as a girl when she dances with all her jewels aglitter,
or when she sits silent with languor in her eyes and a touch
of a tired smile on her lips.

(<https://tagoreweb.in/Verses/poems-198/idly-my-mind-follows-the-3814>)

It hardly needs pointing out that whatever scanty power that the little Kopai river possesses is of a character that is (to appropriate Joseph Nye's term) "soft": modest and unproud, friendly and intimate, nurturing and accommodative, concordant and harmonious, convivial and gleeful, jovial and graceful. It shows nothing of the superciliousness that is attributed to the Padma, a trait that is apparently a prerogative of this river's much greater power and might.

It is tempting to regard this contrast in the light of what the psychologist George Kunz has observed, albeit in a human-communal context, that "The weakness of the powerful is not the challenge from another power; the weakness of the powerful lies in their own power. The powerful ones hold on to their power and it is precisely this egoistic holding of power that makes them most vulnerable to weakness" (Kunz, 1998: 15). Even outside such a viewing, however, Tagore's depiction of two contrary types of river-power lends itself to three distinct categories in a bifarious listing: the first, helpful and cooperative versus imperious and intimidating; the second, big agency versus small power; the third 'ghar' (or familiar home) versus 'bahir' (or estranging world). All of these are ofcourse recurrent tropes within the compass of Tagore's writing. But there is yet another dimension to the poet's ideational ground regarding the river-power dynamics that calls for attention. This is an understanding of a form of power that Foucault describes as located outside social power and which he terms "salvation oriented (as opposed

to political power) ... oblativ (as opposed to the principle of sovereignty) ... individualizing (as opposed to legal power) ... coextensive and continuous with life [and] ... linked with a production of truth — the truth of the individual himself” (Foucault, 1982: 783).

There are several texts of Tagore in which rivers and their power figures in just such a hypostatic context, but the one I will use here is figured in his English-language work *Sadhana /The Realization of Life*. In the third of the essays in this volume (which incidentally had no less than eight reprints in the very first year of its publication in 1919), Tagore notes:

The river has its boundaries, its banks.” But then he goes on to ask: “[B]ut is a river all banks? Or are the banks the final facts about the river? Do not these obstructions themselves give its water an onward motion?

(*English Writings II*, 2012: 298)

What is of particular significance here is the fact that we are offered herein a radically alternative appreciation of the power of rivers, one seen not in terms of varying versions of the idea of a core natural physical agency set apart from or pitted against other greater or lesser forces, human or mechanical (as in Tagore’s play *Mukta-Dhara* (1922) for instance in which a dammed river bursts out with momentous force), but instead in terms of what may be termed a progressive and productive dialectic. Tagore made his implication clear by recounting a personal experience of being on one occasion immobilized in a boat upon a river:

Once, while passing under a bridge, the mast of my boat got stuck in one of its girders. If only for a moment the mast would have bent an inch or two, or the bridge raised its back like a yawning cat, or the river given in, it would have been all right with me. But they took no notice of my helplessness. That is

the very reason why I could make use of the river, and sail upon it with the help of the mast, and that is why, when the current was inconvenient, I could rely upon the bridge. Things are what they are, and we have to know them if we would deal with them, and knowledge of them is possible because our wish is not their law. This knowledge is a joy to us, for the knowledge is one of the channels of our relationship with the things outside us; it is making them our own, and thus widening the limit of our self. (*EW*, II, 2012: 303)

The relativity between the power and powerlessness of rivers, Tagore did not perceive in terms of a simple binary like subjection and dominance, but in terms of a productive confrontation. Hence, the power of a mighty river like the Padma did not fill him solely with a humbling sense of the insignificance of human effort, force or will. In an easy transition made from the observed reality of rivers to a metaphorization of these 'events' into a vital ontology, he declared that life "like a river strikes its banks not to find itself closed in by them, but to realize anew every moment that it has its unending opening towards the sea. It is as a poem that strikes its metre at every step not to be silenced by its rigid regulations, but to give expression every moment to the inner freedom of its harmony" (*EW*, II, 2012: 315).

This consciousness of an arching universal harmony emerging out from a counteractive engagement led Tagore to inscribe his own understanding of the power of rivers. Drawing upon his extensive knowledge of the *Upanishads* in particular and sharing in the contemporary esoteric idealism of certain western metaphysicians like Rene Guenon who wrote of the concept of Universal Man (Guenon, 1996: 6), Tagore claimed that there is a "universal power which is manifested in the universal law [which] is one with our own power. It will thwart us where we are small, where we are *against the current of things*; but it will also help us where we

are great, where we are in unison with the all” (*EW*, II, 2012: 304, emphasis added).

Tagore’s language here of power and currents obviously draws upon a river symbolism replete with potent sacredotal undercurrents. It is possible to believe too that his thinking about rivers somewhere corresponded to the arcane symbolism of some non-Hindu religions like Christianity in which the two lines of the cross are held to represent “amplitude” and “exaltation” respectively. As Rene Guenon explained it, in the “cruciform representation” of the sign of the cross:

the horizontal expansion ... corresponds to the indefinitude of possible modalities of one and the same state of being, regarded integrally, and the vertical super-imposition to the indefinite series of states of the total being. (op. cit.: 11)

This parallels in a way Tagore’s own realization of looking “upon a road from two different points of view”:

One regards it as dividing us from the object of our desire; in that case we count every step of our journey over it as something attained by force in the face of obstruction. The other sees it as the road which leads us to our destination; and as such it is part of our goal. It is already the beginning of our attainment, and by journeying over it we can only gain that which in itself offers to us. (*EW*, II, 2012:282)

Not infrequently, the image of the road becomes a metaphor of a river in the writings of Tagore. There are to be seen in his texts several references to the horizontal breadth of rivers and of fordings or crossings over from one bank to the other, equally as depictions of the onward flows and progressions of rivers. As instances of the first, lines may be adduced/cited, like the following from lyric No. 30 in the *Balaka* volume which read (in Tagore’s own English translation): “I cling to this living raft, my body, in the narrow stream of my earthly years. I leave it when the

crossing is over” (EW, I, 2011: 174). The image of a river-crossing also recurs in the words in the *Gitimalya* song-lyric: “dadiye acho tumi amar...” (“I wait for the time when your boat crosses over to my shore...”) (ibid: 184), and in the *Ksanika* lyric “svalpases” in which there is a verse that runs: “...I shall gently row you by the shelter of the shore where the dark water in ripples are like a dream-ruffled sleep” (ibid: 106). But rivers were also conceived by the poet as forward movements towards the attainment of an oceanic metaphysical consciousness. As Tagore put it in *Sadhana*, “Our life, like a river ... realize[s] that it has its unending opening towards the sea” (EW II, 2012:315). Or, as he put in his lyrics 75 and 103 in *Song Offerings*, “The river has its everyday work to do and hastens through fields and hamlets; yet its incessant stream winds towards the washing of thy feet”; “Let all my songs gather together their diverse strains into a single current and flow to a sea of silence in one salutation to thee” (EW I, 2011: 68 &78).

Lines such as these clearly indicate that the power of rivers was always held by Tagore to be of a kind different from and superior to human social power. The latter, he said, can be measured in terms of a simple one-dimensional linear extension or increase. As he put it once, “it is the endeavour of those who hold power to be supreme, to increase in bulk. They would repeatedly multiply numbers, — the number of men, the number of coins, the number of appliances.” The sad result of such unilateral quests by the powerful was indicted by Tagore in his treatise *Thought Relic* as involving an act of violence exemplified by deeds of sacrifice — the sacrifice of “others’ wealth, others’ rights, others’ lives; for sacrifice is the essence of the cult of power” (EW III, 2012: 31). Rivers in his imagination were somewhat equivalent to metonymic and metaphoric functions, roughly similar perhaps in his mind to diachronic and synchronic extensions, and so it is

perhaps no accident that in a poem written a few months before his death, he wrote:

This life of mine has been nurtured by rivers.
 In its arteries flow the gift of mountain peaks,
 Its fields have been formed by many alluvial layers;
 Vital juices from many sources have spread
 Themselves in harvests upon harvests.
 From the east and the west, networks of song-streams lull its
 sleep and wake,
 River which brings the world near,
 Carries the greetings of the unknown to my door...

(Janmadine 28. Rabindra Rachanabali, Vol. XIII, 1991: 82)

Conclusion

Environmentalists like Elizabeth P. Anderson (2019) have noted that:

For numerous reasons, the modern conception of water as a substance abstracted from social, cultural, and religious context has come under heightened scrutiny. Consequently, there has been greater interest in addressing how water is not just natural, but also historical, political, and cultural. This interest has generated attention to approaches other than eco-hydrological methods to know and understand water and has led to increased recognition of the complexity of the relations between water, society, and ecosystem processes. (n/d. Web)

More recently, river hydrologist Laurence C. Smith in his book *Rivers and Power* has drawn attention to the correlation of water flows with the human ecology itself:

Rivers are beautiful, but their hold over us is far more than aesthetic. Their allure stems from the intimate relationship we have shared natural landscape features since prehistoric times. Our reliance on them — for natural capital, access, territory, well being, and power — has sustained us for millennia and grips us still. (2021: Preview, np)

It is striking how Tagore appears to have anticipated such conclusion as these. There are instances, both oblique and direct, of acknowledgements of these powers of rivers in his poetry, drama and prose. And what is even more striking of the poetic verses quoted above is that they map out a virtual taxonomy, a calculus of the power of rivers on the moulding of Rabindranath Tagore's own very personal and human constitution. There are in these verses acknowledgements, first, of the nurturing powers of rivers on his being; second, an appreciation of the role played by their vital flow in his living tissue; third, their alluvial formation in his mind of fertile terrains suitable for imaginative fruition; fourth, their affusions contributing to renewed artistic creation; fifth and finally, their influence on his circadian rhythm itself. The whole series of blessings finally leads up to a celebration of the rivers' welcome, bringing in of the outside world to the doorstep of his innermost consciousness. We may, in other words, read this poetic passage which was composed on the afternoon of 23 February 1941, barely five months before his demise, as Tagore's concluding paean to the power of rivers regarded not solely within philosophical or metaphysical frames but as a celebration of an intuitive realization of the flow of a constant nourishing influence throughout his creative journey from life to death.

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5

River Sutra

Poetics of River, Popular Culture and Bhupen Hazarika's River Songs

Kailash C. Baral

All water has a perfect memory and forever trying to get back to where it was... It is emotional memory — what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our “flooding.”

Toni Morrison (p. 99)

Introduction

Morrison's words and reflections on Mississippi have a compelling bearing on the theme “River in the Literary Cultures of India”. A metaphor for memory and witness to American cultural history, Morrison's Mississippi is like any river in India that is a reservoir of personal and cultural memory. The evidence of this is well articulated by Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* in reference to the river Himavathy. The river is not only a divine gift of Kenchamma, the presiding deity of the village, but is woven into the life-cycles of the inhabitants being entwined with their varied emotional and spiritual experiences. Himavathy could be any river in India

that is part and parcel of our existence. Raja Rao unravels Himavathy's significance upholding its banks and *ghats* as holy while universalizing the river's spiritual and cultural import in a pan-Indian context.

The primacy of rivers in Indian culture has been articulated in the *Rig Veda* with reference to the land of *Sapta Sindhu* or seven rivers. However, this geography is expanded with the centrality of rivers to represent the whole of India in other texts. In *Vishnu Purana*, the cultural geography of India is imagined as the land that expands between the sea in the south to Mount Everest in the north:

Uttaram yat samudrasya, Himadreschaiva dakshinam!
Varsham tad Bharatam nama Bharati yatra santatih !! (Verse 2.3.1).¹

(The country situated to the north of the sea and the south of the Himalayas is known as Bharata and its progeny (residents) known as Bharati).

The *Sapta Sindhu* or the seven sacred rivers of Vedic India are invoked in a ritual gesture that deepens our ritual/spiritual practices in underlining an expanded concept of river cultures representing the whole country:

Gange cha Yamune chaiva
Godavari Sarswati
Narmade Sindhu Kaaveri
*jale Asmin sannidhim kuru (Snan Sloka)*²

(O Holy Rivers Ganga and Yamuna, and also Godavari and Saraswati,
O Holy Rivers Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri; Please be present in this water (and make it Holy).

The phenomenal impact of rivers in our spiritual/cultural imaginary is undeniable. If the sea and the Himalayas constitute India's outside boundary, the rivers of India underline its internal, interconnected cultural life. The land

of Bharata is broadly constituted of river valleys in that rivers have remained inalienable part/s of our cultural life from pre-colonial to colonial to postcolonial phases of our history. As an entity of nature, rivers in India have remained the source of our ritual/spiritual, material/cultural aspirations transcending time and space, as the Ganges flows down from a mythic past to an eternity yet to arrive. The livelihood of many communities across the geography of India is dependent on rivers. Witness to time and history, rivers in India speak to us and are spoken about by poets, geographers, historians, archaeologists, pilgrims and so on, accepting them as living entities.

The primacy of rivers in Indian cultural life has been scripted in the Vedas. The Vedas refer to 21 rivers of India; among them the river Saraswati is the iconic one. Although some historians have contested the existence of the Saraswati, recent excavations in Haryana surely will put to rest any debate about the existence of this river connecting the Ganges and the Kabul river in Afghanistan. In the “Nadi Sukta” of *Rigveda* (10.75), it is said:

All this is verily waters.
 The elements of the universe, the vital airs, and living things
 Indeed food, immortality, sovereignty, the godheads
 The hymns, the yajuses, the Light, the Truth
 All the Deities, and the three Planes
 Are all indeed the waters.³

Rivers are acknowledged as the source of *tattva* or knowledge as they include three planes, elements of the universe including divine and human, and all living things along with Light, Truth and Deities. Water is linked to *pancha bhootas* (five elements), one of the elements that the human body is constituted of. Like air, water is the very source of life for it makes human existence possible on land. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the two iconic epic texts

also refer to many rivers of the country apart from the seven sacred rivers. These texts become pan-Indian if we follow the river narratives and references.

River Sutra

I am indeed indebted to Gita Mehta, for she, in depicting the life of the river Narmada, has underlined the interconnectedness of diverse Indian spiritual and cultural practices in her work *A River Sutra* (1993). The first part of the title of my paper is inspired by her work to underline diversity of Indian cultural life held together by rivers. In a deeper way, rivers in India are symbolic of our composite culture and cultural consciousness that could be constituted into a poetics of river. Rivers, in constant flow, representing life's ups and downs as evinced in tide and ebb or surge and recede resonating the very character of a river. In a symbolic way rivers constantly remind us the 'transitoriness' of human life. The banks of a river symbolize the limits of human action, holding forth a normative code not to cross the boundaries thereby not dominating/violating laws of nature or *dharma*. In its flow, it also symbolizes our spiritual aspirations and connectedness across territories to an indivisible humanity. The river as an entity of nature is considered sacred in our cultural imaginary as Mehta maintains:

Bathing in the rivers of Yamuna purifies a man in seven days, in the waters of Saraswati in three, in the waters of Ganges in one, but the Narmada purifies with a single sight of her waters. Salutations to thee. O Narmada! (*A River Sutra*, 163)

The purifying ability of a river is invested with the idea that rivers wash away all our sins. Further, the waters of the seven sacred rivers are collected to undertake important rituals/pujas. We may be reminded of the holy waters of Ganges; any visitor to Varanasi buys a jar of water to keep at

home for ritual purposes. Poets lavish praise on the rivers as deities; shrines on the banks of these rivers have kept intact pilgrim footfalls for centuries. As water ways, rivers have sustained trade and commerce for ages. Death rituals on the banks of these rivers and immersion of ashes into their waters are believed by the Hindus to allow a peaceable passage to the dead to the kingdom of the divine. From birth to death, rivers in India have sustained human life in their manifold magic. Death of a river is never part of Indian cultural imaginary. A river may disappear but cannot die. *Anta salila* or internal stream has a creative and cultural connotation. No river ever dies; it simply disappears externally while it continues with its internal flow. In another sense, the concept of *anta salila* could mean the cultural unity of India in the face of diversity; it also implies cultural continuity in the face of historical changes.

Poetics of River

The above instances underline a cultural poetics that provides an understanding of how rivers are inseparable from common life in India. There is a structure of thought that broadens into our understanding of the relation between nature and culture. As an entity of nature, rivers have always stirred our creative imagination. River poems from all cultures attribute human characteristics to rivers having deep moments of reflection on human existence. Henry Longfellow aptly writes:

Thou hast taught me, Silent River!
 Many a lesson, deep and long;
 Thou has been a generous giver;
 I can give thee but a song. (“To the River Charles”)

From Longfellow’s ruminations to the romantic association of Coleridge to Otter, where his childhood memories beguile to “Lone manhood’s care...” (“To the River Otter”) to Spencer’s

invocation to the river Thames in “Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song” bear testimony to the fact that river is a symbol of life and human activity as articulated in Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” Rhetorical allusions to ‘life as a river’ are aplenty in river poems, underlining passage of time with ups and downs. In Whitman’s words: “Flow on river! Flow with the flood-tide, and ebb/with the ebb tide!... drench with/your splendour me, or the men and women/generations after me” (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”) Further, in a meditative moment he asks:

What is then between us?
 What is the count of hundreds of
 years between us? Whatever it is, it avails not — distance
 avails not,
 and place avails not. (ibid)

Whitman’s reflections on the relation between man and river go beyond time and space. Yet time and space constitute the corner stone of a poetics of river in that its symbolic association with human existence, spirituality and so on are woven into normative practices while going beyond. A poetics of river from India constitutes an inclusive sociology of life based on equality and free will, for a river is a giver; it does not deny anyone who wants its water and use of it in any form while allowing exploitation of its resources for human welfare. Further, rivers also represent a strong sense of cultural and natural ecology with spiritual aspirations in this life and beyond. Rabindranath Tagore reemphasizes this very thought in the following lines in his poem “Janmadin” (Birthday):

This life of mine’s been nurtured by a river
 In its arteries flow the gifts of mountain-peaks
 Its fields have been shaped by many alluvial layers
 Mysterious vital juices from diverse sources have spread
 themselves in harvests upon harvests

From the east and the west networks of song-streams lull its
sleep and wake.

(“Janmadin”, February 1942, translated by Parineeta
Dandekar).

Tagore’s reflection elevates and transforms a physical river into a sublime song-stream. Nadi like *nadi* constitutes metaphorically the arteries in human body and in the alluvial soil of the heart it nurtures songs of man in love, joy, sorrow and gives rise to an aspiration to immortalize mortality. Human mind is like a river — when turbulent, it is difficult to predict, but when calm, it brings clarity to our thoughts. Emily Dickinson’s poem “My River Runs to Thee” explains the very *dharma* of a river running to meet the sea that may be alluded to life flowing to meet the divine/the *paramaatma* like a lover and a devotee. Hence a poetics of a river resonates through our temporal existence and eternal aspiration.

River and Popular Culture: Bhupen Hazarika’s “Mahabahu Brahmaputra”

Apart from *sastras*, the *sutras*, the romances and the ritual representations with canonical and non-canonical resonances, rivers in India have been a source of folklore and popular culture. There are songs composed from time immemorial to signify life on the banks of rivers. There are films made representing the river Ganges and many documentaries bring to bear on how the diversity of cultural life pans out on the banks of the river. The river Ganges has been an inspiration for many Bollywood films such as *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai*, *Ganga Teri Pani Amrit*, *Ganga Ki Saugandha* etc. “Jis desh mein Ganga behti hai/ Hum us desh ke vasi hain” has been a classic song that defines our identity as Indians represented through the river Ganges. There are many documentaries

made on most of the rivers of India, including many on the river Ganges.

Popular culture as defined by *Oxford Bibliographies* is a set of practices, beliefs and objects that embody the most broadly shared meanings of a social system. Most river literatures across the board come under popular culture. Folk songs of Eastern and North-East India are mostly inspired by rivers. There is a genre of river songs from West Bengal in India and Bangladesh called *Bhatiyali*, famous for their resonances and reflective moods having generated many conversations on life. Outside this folk tradition, there are popular singers who have composed and sung river songs. In the present context, a discussion on river songs of the legendary singer Bhupen Hazarika will be attempted. Hazarika's "Mahabahu Brahmaputra", a song on the great river Brahmaputra, is the context of my discussion.

Bhupen Hazarika is a unique talent; his songs have a strong folk component in tone and tenor with evocative rhetorical flourish that matches his baritone voice. A Babasaheb Phalke award winner and a Bharat Ratna, Hazarika has a long and distinguished career as a singer, lyricist and filmmaker. Above all, he is a cultural icon. Hazarika's songs have many references to the river Brahmaputra and Luit, its other name, for these references signify an organic relation that grew out of the loam of his native soil, Assam. Not only the Brahmaputra but songs on the Ganga, the Padma, the Jamuna, the Kaveri, the Godavari, the Siyang, even small rivers of Assam and rivers like the Nile, the Mississippi and the Volga are also part of his repertoire. The original lyric "Bistirna Parore" in Assamese with its music inspired by Paul Robeson's "Ol' Man River" has been rendered into Bengali and Hindi with titles of "O Ganga tumi boichho keno" and "O Ganga Behti Ho Kyun." "Bistirna Parore" is an Assamese song on Luit and the river is addressed as Old Luit (*Burha Luit*).

The song has a romantic ring but is immortalized not only for its magical composition but also for the poet's concerns for the common man's suffering in society that has been morally corrupt. The Old Luit is replaced by Ganga in its Hindi version, however, the concerns remain the same. The interrogative mood is pursued to unlock the silence of the river Ganga on social corruption. In another song "Ganga", he talks about its sister the river Padma in which the singer's heart goes out to the insufferable Partition of India and also to the migrants of pre-Partition India battered by cyclones and flood who chose to make Assam their home.

Among over twenty river songs, Brahmaputra remains close to the heart of Hazarika. "Mahabahu Brahmaputra" is one of the powerful renditions that reflects the cultural soul of Assam in the broader context of India. The man who finds the sweetness of his land also discovers the strength of his cultural inheritance. If in "O Ganga Behti Ho Kyun", Hazarika underlines the indifference of the river to human suffering, in "Padma" he underlines the suffering of Partition. Yet Brahmaputra comes alive in his response to Assam agitation. In "Luitporia Deka Bandu" (Young Friends on the Banks of the Luit) he writes:

The Luit today foams and flows
In a terrible speed
Bows to you, seeing
The tide of your courage.
The whole world stretches its neck
And gazes at you
You have jumped into the battle of life
Under the pledge of life.

(Trans. Upendranath Sarma in Deka, p. 289
as cited in Malakar, 2019: 107)

Hazarika has been always a youth icon. This lyric composed against the backdrop of Assam agitation once

again uses Brahmaputra as a source of energy that the youth represents to being about meaningful change in Assam. Brahmaputra's unwieldy energy is seen in its maturity and rolling calmness in a song "Osta Akashare" (The Setting Sun):

Tinged with dreams of setting sun
The weary waters of Luit flow crimson
They flow, the roll on.

(Trans. Pradip Acharya in Deka, p.329
as cited in Malakar, 2019: 108)

Hazarika has always empathized with the poor and the marginalized often expressing his resentment against Brahmaputra's destructive mood. He talks about house collapse, loss of life and property, corrosion of the river banks and displacement of people from their home and hearth. To root out the moral corruption of society, he complains against/to the river for being a mute witness in spite of its awesome power. Hazarika's engagement with Assam is carried forward with his engagement with the mighty river as a metaphor for all occasions; Brahmaputra to him is not a physical river but the source of his emotions and imaginations.

The soul of Assam, the Brahmaputra, is not just another large water body. It is the lifeline of Assam. In one of his interviews, Hazarika has once said, the Brahmaputra has been a source of inspiration not just for him but everyone living on its banks. The river has shaped Assam's economy and culture; it is a witness to people's sorrow and happiness. The various moods and dispositions of the river have inspired poets, composers and singers of Assam and the Brahmaputra has been a living presence in creative works and narratives. Not only Hazarika but many others like Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the doyens of Assamese literature and culture, have been fascinated by its vastness, its mysteries and its destructive power.

Hazarika addresses the Brahmaputra in various names: Luit, Borluit, Lohit, Burhaluit and Louhity (Malakar, 2019: 86). Through these different names, he expresses varied dispositions of the river sometimes calm, sometimes turbulent, often destructive causing misery to people through devastating floods, but mostly a cultural entity that is the source of Assamese history and mirrors its cultural life. Further, the diverse demography of Assam also identifies with the river through their migration narratives, livelihood occupations, commercial transactions, wars and victories in that the river becomes a source of remembrance of the past and ancestors. The river Brahmaputra, unlike other rivers in the country, has a masculine identity; hence it inspires every one's imagination and in turn the river opens its heart to everybody's emotions representing a composite culture.

The Brahmaputra is a transnational river. Originating from the Manas Sarovar of the Kailash Range of the Himalayas, it has a journey of 2900 kms. After completing its course in Assam, it joins with the Ganges in a confluence and meets the Bay of Bengal. Dulal Chandra Goswami offers a graphic description of the physical river Brahmaputra:

Flowing eastwards over the Tibetan Plateau, the Brahmaputra known as the Tsangpo, enters a narrow gorge at Pe and continues south wards across the east-west trending ranges of the Himalayas before debouching onto the Assam plain near Pasighat.... The flow abruptly turns south near Dhuburi and enters Bangladesh with a new name Jamuna. It meets the Ganga and assumes the name Padma and merges into the Bay of Bengal. (2009: 13-14)

For its three names, flowing through three nations and representing three religions, the river is captured beautifully in the words of Tiziana and Gianni Baldizzone (1998): "Tsangpo, Brahmaputra, Jamuna. Three names but a single river. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam. Three faiths, but a single

river.... Stories about the men who came to search for and discover, this river. About armies who crossed it. About pilgrims who purified themselves in its waters. About the gods who quarrelled on its banks. About savage tribes and tea pioneers. About the otters and fish in its waters and the tigers of Bengal. About the ashes of the dead carried along by the Ganges, and deposited by it into the Ocean” (p.4). Unlike the Baldizzones, in *The Unquiet River: A Biography of Brahmaputra* (2019), Arup Jyoti Saikia untangles the layered history of Assam through the life of the river, the way it shapes the topography and the cultural history of the state. There are other works as well from colonial explorations of the river to the conflicts at Sadiya, what is known as the Abor war to the arrival of the Baptist missionaries in Sadiya in 1836, the Brahmaputra has been a witness to all. Not only Assam, but the whole of the North-East India has been woven into the narrative of the Brahmaputra culture-scape.

Hazarika’s representation of the Brahmaputra has been an attempt to bring together the river’s geography and its cultural history. Anthologies of Hazarika’s compositions started appearing from 1993. The first anthology titled *Geetawali* was compiled by Surya Hazarika of his songs composed till 1986. Translations of his lyrics appeared in a volume published in the same year. Under the editorship of Surya Hazarika, complete works of Hazarika was published in three volumes titled *Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Rachanavali* in 2008 (cited in Malakar, 2019: 46).

“Mahabahu Brahmaputra” stands out as a distinctive song, for it celebrates the composite culture of Assam. For Hazarika, the river is “maha milanor tirtha”, a place of pilgrimage for great harmony and synthesis; it is a confluence of different groups of people, of languages and cultures and of diverse faiths as it celebrates universal brotherhood.

I think the song “Mahabahu Brahmaputra” is an attempt

to unravel the historical consciousness of Assamese cultural identity through the Brahmaputra:

The mighty-armed Brahmaputra rolls on
 The pilgrimage of the great meeting
 Rolling on down the ages and showing
 The meaning and worth of harmony.
 The Barobhuyans came from distant Kanyakubj
 The forebears of Brahmaputra our great Sankardev
 Where Ajan Fakir from the desert land
 Wrote and sang enriching *Jikirs*
 As Dilowar from Delhi painted the manuscripts
 And Tegh Bahadur from the land of five rivers
 Built a sure bridge of faith
 And revealed myriad forms of harmony.
 Lachit engaged the enemy at Saraighat
 Uniting all in bonds of patriotism
 All races, faiths and tongues together
 Bishnu Rabha of the Kirat race
 Gave life to native ways and mores
 To reveal myriad forms of harmony.
 Hundreds come braving the storm of Padma
 The Luit received them in their bank
 To meet and merge, give and take
 As did Rabindranath say.
 It was here that Jyoti Agarwal
 Cascaded down as light
 Thwarting all evil mongers
 With the might of his light.

(Trans: Pradip Acharya in Deka, p. 287).

Migration, historical events, local bards and holy men coming from afar, all have contributed to the cultural illumination of Assam. According to Hazarika, the cultural soul of Assam, the Brahmaputra is demonstrative of the *mantra* of harmony for it has been witness to Assamese history and its most potent cultural symbol. There cannot be a more memorable song on Indian's cause for unity and harmony

than the present one. Like the streams and rivulets originating from different sources merge into the mighty Brahmaputra, the same way different castes, tribes, races of people coming from far and near have constituted the Assamese community. In his prelude before singing "Mahabahu Brahmaputra", Hazarika reflects in saying: "Whenever would Bohag come in its glorious self/But to the two banks of the Brahmaputra/And what, we wonder, could be its true legacy?" This question is answered in the song that the Brahmaputra is the true symbol of *samannaya* or harmony. All possible kind of harmony are layered in this song that of mind/heart, nature/culture, faith/cultural practices, knowledge/meaning, geography/demography, history/conflict, difference and sameness. Migration of people from different parts of India and visit of great souls such as Guru Tegh Bahadur coming to Dhubri in 1669 (There is the Gurudwara Tegh Bahadur Shrine at Dhubri) and Azan Fakir, the Sufi saint coming from Baghdad in the 17th century (His Dargah is at Sarguri, near Sivsagar), all have contributed to the *prakash* or illumination of the cultural life of Assam. Local holy men like Sankardev also have led people in the spiritual path reshaping the Assamese society. Historical incidents such as Lachit Borphukan's victory over the Mughal army is mentioned and cultural heroes like Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and great folksinger Bishnu Rabha are admired in the song.

Conclusion

What Hazarika has underlined is the spirit of harmony in the representation of the Brahmaputra culture. The cultural calling is to make bridges and to travel together in the tide and ebb of time in a spirit of give and take. What we need for Hazarika's heroes, like Bhishma who could suffer on his bed of arrows in the *Mahabharata*, is to see that victory be with

the righteous and the truthful. In his song “Bistirna Parore”, he invokes Bhishma to lament asking the river — “Why don’t you awake heroes like him?”

If you are the son of Brahma
That lineage is just in name
Why don’t you inspire us all?
Why don’t you awake countless heroes
Like old Bhishma laid in the bed of arrows
In the raging battle at Kurukhetra?

(Trans. Nirendra nath Thakuria in Deka, p. 165)

Like Hazarika’s songs, river songs in India represent diverse aspects of our cultural life. India’s river cultures come alive in many traditions of river songs that like the flow of a river would continue to hold our past, present and the future that is yet to arrive.

Notes

1. *Vishnu Purana* is one of the 18th acknowledged epics of India. It is a Vaishnavite text and Lord Vishnu is its central character. The epic has 23000 *slokas*, divided into six parts. The *sloka* in the text is referred to 2.3.1. <https://www.seshspeaks.com/navina-bhaaratam.php#:~:text=>, accessed on 11.01. 2021.
2. *Snan sloka* is a mantra that the Hindus recite before taking bath. https://greenmesg.org/stotras/others/gange_ca_yamune_caiva.php, accessed on 11.01.21
3. The *Nadi-sukta* hymn of the *Rig Veda* mentions 21 rivers that include the Ganga in the east and the Kubha (Kabul) in the west. These rivers are critical references to the geography of Vedic civilization. The present citation is part of 10.75 of *Rig Veda*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadistuti_sukta, accessed on 11.01.21

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6

River and the Floating Child in Indian Mythology

Umesh Patra

Paradigm of the Floating Child

Once upon a time, a sage named Durvasa offered a boon to a maiden of exquisite beauty and unparalleled acumen, named Pritha, being pleased by her resourceful and selfless service. He gave her a *mantra* (holy chant) by the incantation of which she could summon any deity, as and when she wished, in their corporeal forms. After the sage left, Pritha would spend hours thinking about the power of that magical spell. At a moment of impulse, she chanted that *mantra*, and appealed to the Sun god to appear before her. The Sun descended in an alluring andromorphic form. Petrified by his glare, Pritha begged his forgiveness for having disturbed the god from his daily rounds and requested him to be on his way. The Sun, however, could not go without giving a gift. Therefore, he blessed her with a child. Here was a union between the divine and the human, the celestial and the earthly, the immortal and the mortal. However, it was a time, perhaps not very different from ours, when a child, even the son of the Sun himself, would not be acceptable to a woman out of wedlock. To avoid social stigma, Pritha, who would later be known as

Kunti, parted from the child by setting him afloat in a river in a padded basket. As fate would have it, the child survived, and was given to a childless couple who raised him as their son. He was named Karna (meaning ‘ear’), as a reminder of the gold earrings that he was wearing when he was found in the river Ganga.

The afore-mentioned story of the birth of Karna is found in the Indian epic *Mahabharata* and is retold in various folk versions. A country named after a river (Sindhu/Indus) is replete with narratives where the river is revered as a mother and a goddess. This chapter is an attempt to collate a few such narratives in which the river acts as a foster-mother, nurturer of a new-born child, the last resort of an unwelcome union — mostly between a human and a (quasi-)divine entity. In all such stories, this chapter seeks to proclaim that *the abandon child never dies*, but miraculously survives due to the role played by the river. Such stories are found in the twin epics — the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, numerous folktales, the Puranas as well as modern art-forms of popular culture including motion pictures. Taking cue from Vladimir Propp’s morphological analysis of Russian folk tales, this chapter would try to provide a “description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and to the whole” (Propp, 2004:72). To make some working hypotheses regarding the underlying pattern, let me recount the second story in which the river plays a key role in the survival of a new-born child.

The mighty King Kansa, the brother of Devaki, learns through a divine prophecy that his sister’s son would eventually be the cause of his death. Kansa incarcerates his sister Devaki and her husband Vasudev. Kansa kills every child his sister delivers in the prison cell to prevent the occurrence of the prophecy. Eventually, Devaki would give birth to her ninth child who is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu

himself known as Krishna. The night he is born, the prison guards fall asleep. The manacles are unlocked. The prison doors stand ajar. Before Kansa would arrive, Vasudev leaves the prison cell, carrying the child in a basket perched upon his head, walks across the river Yamuna to transport the new-born child to safety. The river in a spate allows him to cross while a giant serpent protects the child from the pouring rain with its raised hood. This child named Krishna would be raised in the care of his adoptive parents Nanda and Yashoda till adolescence. Before we proceed to the next such story, the following assumptions can be made. We could then examine if these would hold true in the case of the other stories as well.

- i. In these stories, the new-born child is set afloat (the river like a nurturing mother saves/protects the child).
- ii. The child is set afloat the river to avoid social stigma concerning his mother or dangers to its own life (just as the flow of the river signifies continuation of life).
- iii. The child is a (quasi-)divine being or a sort of demi-god, and a male (the male child (*purusha*) makes the river (as a part of *prakriti*) suit his needs and purposes).
- iv. The river transports the child to the safety of its foster-parents (river as a passage to safety/happiness (amid turbulence, albeit paradoxically), just as it is a passage to *moksha* in the afterlife).

Filial Role of the River

As we move on with more such narratives, we would test the validity of these assumptions and explore, in greater depth, the symbolic significance of the river in the roles mentioned above. In the case of both Krishna and Karna, the river has a greater role to play than being merely the conveyer. Krishna would spend most of his adolescent years near the river

Yamuna. The river bank would provide the perfect milieu for his valiant as well as amorous deeds, popularly known as *Krishnaleela*. When the Yamuna was poisoned by an enormous hundred-hooded serpent Kaliya, Krishna came to the rescue. He subdued the snake by dancing upon its hundred heads and freed the river from its venom. It was the bamboo grove in the riverbank where he would find his flute and meet clandestinely with his consort Radha. To this day, each ripple in the river Yamuna is replete with his boyhood sagas. The Yamuna would act as Krishna's foster mother who would shed all inhibitions and would allow him to do things that Yashoda would not. Here, I quote an excerpt of a song from an Odia album in which the river Yamuna and Yashoda seem to compete for Krishna's company:

Yamuna says to Yashoda, "Why are you so Proud?
 Krishna spends more time with me than with you.
 When Krishna eats with you, he washes his hands in my water.
 He plays truant with you, but is so charming with me...
 When he is sulking from you, in my shore, he hides.
 He cries with you, but with me, he is all smiles.
 You await his return home, but he would not leave my shore.
 He acts stubborn with you but performs glorious deeds near me.
 He is all the wealth you have, but it is me that he really adores.
 He may be the full moon for you, but rests in my lap all day long.
 He is more intimate with me than with you."

(Mishra, 2011) [my translation]

In this music video, Yamuna ascends from the river as an elegant woman and teases a teary-eyed Yashoda with her monologue about Krishna's preference for her to the latter. She says Krishna enjoys her company more than that of Yashoda who imposes strict constraints on him. An angry Yashoda had one day tied the naughty Krishna to a wooden mortar to restrict his movements and punished

him on several other occasions on complaints by the neighbouring households. Psychoanalytically speaking, if Yashoda represents the Superego with the admonition and advice that parental care consists of, the Yamuna connotes pure Id which allows Krishna absolute freedom. Balkrishna (the infant name of Krishna) is a naughty kid who comes very close to representing a creature driven by sheer Id, filling his mouth with butter and soil and so on. As an adolescent and rebellious boy, Krishna would be away for hours playing with his friends, meeting Radha, and doing playful deeds while Yashoda would pine for him at home.

The above song is a part of a video album of Odia *bhajans* (devotional lyrics). Myriad Odia *bhajans* relate the exploits of Krishna along the river Yamuna. Ironically, the river Yamuna does not flow in any part of the state of Odisha. What is the *raison d'être* of these songs then? It is noteworthy that Jagannath, the chief deity of Odisha, is viewed as Krishna in the popular Odia belief. The idol of Jagannath, along with his sister Subhadra and brother Balaram, were carved out of a driftwood floating in the Bay of Bengal. Legend has it that when the Bengali Vaishnavite Saint Chaitanya came to the Jagannath temple in Puri, he would see Krishna in Jagannath. Since then, Jagannath and Krishna are synonymous for the Odia collective psyche. Therefore, Odia *bhajans* attributed to Jagannath often allude to the life of Krishna. Satyapir, a syncretic deity of Odisha, whose cult was popularized somewhere near the 16th and 17th century, is also regarded as a form of Jagannath. His birth-story, narrated below, also follows the same mythic paradigm.

A princess named Sandhyavati gets pregnant by smelling a flower and gives birth to a pound of flesh, which she throws in the river Begawati. The flesh is swallowed by a tortoise who gives birth to a child which also floats on the river. The floating child is rescued by a Brahmin who acts as his foster

parent. After attaining youth, the child roams around the river Nur, and one day finds a strange book floating in the river. He takes hold of the book which is the *Qur'an*. When he takes the book to the Brahmin, he orders him to throw the book away, but the boy says that the *Qur'an* and the *Purana* are the same and preaches the same moral values. The child is named 'Satya-Pir', a combination of the Hindu god Satyanarayana and the Muslim Pir (meaning a holy sage). The story of his birth and adventure are narrated in *Malanchar Pala* by Krishna Hari Das (qtd. in Panda and Dash, 1986: 24).

In the case of Satyapir too, the child, a demi-god, is conceived by the fragrance of a flower following which his biological mother abandons him. The story of Satyapir in a medieval rendition is evidently weaved to bring about a harmonious confluence between the Hindu and Islamic faiths. The intended wordplay in the *Qur'an* and *Purana* and formation of the portmanteau word 'Satya-Pir' were conspicuous attempts in this direction. While the *Qur'an* is the holy book of Islamic faith, *Purana* connotes an entire genre of Hindu mythological texts. Satyapir (a syncretic deity) is conceived as an *avatar* of Jagannath, and Jagannath is viewed as Krishna, ergo, Satyapir is seen as Krishna too. It shows a glimpse of the assimilative Indian culture that rejuvenates a 'Great tradition' by its ramifications in multiple little ones. I am using the words 'Great traditions' and 'Little traditions' as heuristic tools borrowed from an acclaimed Indian poet and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan. Responding to the question "Is there *an* [sic] Indian Way of Thinking?", Ramanujan states, "There is no single Indian way of thinking: there are Great and Little traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk" (Dharwadker, 1999: 35). As a part of the Sanskrit classical tradition, the stories of Karna and Krishna are part of the 'Great tradition' that could be defined in opposition to the local, folk narratives which recount the

birth of Satyapir. Together they become what Ramanujan would call a 'supersystem'. He further states:

...what's called the Great Tradition is not singular, but plural—it is a set of interactive pan-Indian systems, Brahminism, Buddhism, Jainism, with *tantra* and *bhakti* interacting variously with these. To be comprehensive we should add Islam, Christianity etc, and modernity itself as the other active systems that participate in this give-and-take. (Dharwadker, 1999: 536)

To vindicate Ramanujan, it would be pertinent to mention that Jagannath, who acts here as the fulcrum between Krishna and Satyapir, is viewed also as a Buddhist shrine. There is a saying that the sacred object (*Salagram*) in the wooden idol of Jagannath is a tooth relic of Lord Buddha. Being named Jagannath, he shows evidence of being a Jaina deity of the 'Nath' lineage. His abode at Puri became the site for Chaitanya's propagation of bhakti movement and led to the emergence of Odia bhakti literature especially by the five legendary poets collectively addressed as *Panchasakha* or five friends (for a fuller development of this idea, see Patra, 2018: 73-80).

Thus, the Great Indian tradition perpetuates itself through the stories of Krishna, Karna, Satyapir and in countless other guises, in multiple languages, in different time periods. In case of all these stories, the child has a tragic birth story. Both Kunti and Sandhyavati were virgin mothers, while Devaki spiritually conceived an incarnation of Vishnu. Both Krishna and Satyapir were assisted by the rivers Yamuna and Nur respectively. Both disobeyed their corporeal foster-parents and received their instructions without inhibition from the rivers. Karna was illegitimate for Kunti, Krishna was fatal for Kansa, Satyapir was illegitimate for his mother. Yet they all were accepted by the river. A river has just one rule, to flow from a higher to the lower plane as '*nirnaga*', as an Odia

name for the river suggests. In its unhindered and uninhibited strive to flow downward, the river exemplifies the human desires that seek fulfilment utterly oblivious of morality or any stringent ethical code of behaviour.

Paradigm of Floating Child in Visual Media

The mythic pattern of the river as the saviour has also percolated to many forms of popular culture. The stories from Indian mythology have been presented through numerous folk and classical performative genres. The media of cinema and television (both animation and feature films) have also provided a fertile ground for many mythical patterns to germinate. In his study on Hindi cinema in particular, Gregory D. Booth asserts that “beneath the Westernised gloss of commercial cinema, and despite its manipulative capitalist tendencies, there are direct connections with the large body of epic stories that exist in oral and written form throughout India” (Booth, 1995: 172). What Booth says about Hindi cinema holds true for cinemas in other languages in India too. Acclaimed Indian psychoanalyst and author Sudhir Kakar warns against categorizing movies as ‘individual creations’ and includes a substantial study of Indian movies alongside mythological narratives and folktales to explore Indian sexuality. In his famous book *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*, he states:

I have always felt, at least for a society such as India where individualism even now stirs but faintly that it is difficult to maintain a distinction between folktales and myths as products of collective fantasy on the one hand and movies and literature as individual creations on the other. The narration of a myth or a folktale almost invariable includes an individual variation, a personal twist by the narrator in the omission and addition of details and the placing of an accent, which makes his personal voice discernible within the collective chorus.

(Kakar, 1989: 4)

Kakar upholds the view of Richard Shweder that “whenever an orthodox Hindu wishes to prove a point or convey what the world is like or ought to be like, he or she is more than likely to begin his exposition with that shift in the register of voice which is a prelude to the sentence, “Let me tell you a story.” (qtd. in Kakar, 1989: 1-2). According to Kakar, Indian minds find a ‘special potency’ in the art of storytelling as the medium of instruction. The deeper layers of truth are revealed to Indians in narratives, in the guise of experiential reality, not in theorems. Movies, as a modern medium of the Indian narrative tradition, continue to retell the old stories in new guises. Prima facie, movies show in carefully crafted sequences the moving images that lend shape to a version of a narrative conceived by an individual writer or director. At a deeper level, the Indian movies narrate the stories that resonate with the millions of viewers, cater to their tastes, and reveal their deeper unconscious realisations. Responding to the backlash that commercial Indian movies are subject to, Kakar maintains that the lack of attention to details and the formulaic depictions of human lives in Indian movies may make them unrealistic, yet they can’t be considered untrue as they are the products of the collective fantasy of the people (Kakar, 1981: 14). Comparing Hindi movies to fairy tales, he writes:

The stereotypical twists and turns of a film plot ensure the repetition of the very message that makes a fairy tale so deeply satisfying to children...At the conclusion of both films and fairy tales, parents are generally happy and proud, the princess is won, and the villains are either ruefully contrite and their battered bodies satisfactorily litter the landscape.

(Kakar, 1981: 13)

The enterprise of commercial film-making is fuelled by the yearning to make money, to please the masses. This very drive propels the directors and producers to titillate

as well as satisfy the unconscious desires of the masses. It would be pertinent to discuss a movie that Kakar discusses extensively in his book *Intimate Relations* in order to provide revealing insights into the Indian psyche. One movie of our concern here is *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*. This 1985 Hindi movie, directed by veteran actor, director, and producer Raj Kapoor, narrates the toils of a village maiden named Ganga who falls in love with a city boy named Narendra from Kolkata. Despite oppositions from her rural community, she ties the marital knot with him who must depart for his hometown alone the very next day. However, once he leaves Ganga, parental pressures make it impossible for him to get back to her. In the meanwhile, Ganga conceives a child, and gives birth to a boy in the absence of Narendra. After receiving no communication from her husband for nearly a year, she decides to leave her abode in the hills, descend to the plains to deliver the baby to his father. Her path is strewn with many hurdles as she narrowly escapes several attempts of sexual assaults. A pimp sells her as a courtesan to a *kotha* owner (a brothel — usually a disreputable place where women sing and dance to entertain wealthy patrons) in Banaras. Eventually, she arrives in Kolkata and is made to perform at the wedding ceremony of her betrothed, Narendra. He recognizes her instantly, and after a fight-scene with goons from his father's side, gets united with Ganga and his son. Kakar psychoanalytically breaks down the plot and characters of the movie to unearth the hidden sadomasochistic experiences the audience might derive from the depiction of Ganga's humiliation:

Thus Ganga's screen image, with the infant clutched perpetually to her breast, becomes the fantasized persona of the mother from a particular stage of childhood. The faces of various villains on the other hand, coalesce into the visage of the bad aggressive father, forcing the poor mother to submit to his unspeakable desire. (Kakar, 1989: 33)

In the course of our discussion, this movie shows the shift of the focus from the child to the mother. Ganga, the protagonist of this movie, shares her name with the sacred Indian river, Ganga. In the beginning of the movie, Narendra goes to Gangotri, the origin of the Ganga, to collect water. It is suggested that the water at Gangotri is pure and pristine but gets heavily polluted by the time it reaches the Bay of Bengal. Ganga, an innocent village dweller at Gangotri, serves as a personification of Ganga, the river. She reaches Kolkata via Allahabad (now Prayag) and Banaras (now Varanasi, also known as Kashi), the famous Indian cities, primarily for their *ghats* alongside the river Ganga. The attempts at her modesty could be read as the constant pollution that creep into the river over the course of its journey. At Narendra's wedding, she narrates her suffering through the following song:

A sad woman narrates her tale in tears:

O Ram, your Ganga is polluted by washing away the sins of sinners.

(*Ram Teri Ganga Maili*) [my translation]

In Ganga, we find the biological mother of the child taking enormous pains to convey the child to safety. No amount of suffering on her part would persuade her to part from the child. The child is a boy and is abandoned by his father in his ignorance. As the movie concludes with the union of Ganga with Narendra, symbolising the river Ganga falling into the Bay of Bengal, the child's growing up years do not form the part of the narrative. Instead of a floating child, we find the image of a child in its mother's lap. The mother not only conveys the child but is also conveyed to her husband through the child. The role of the mother Ganga is like the river who floats and delivers the child to a destination. It maybe noted that the river Ganga too is considered as a holy mother.

The trope of the floating child could be aptly examined in another movie titled *Baahubali: The Beginning*. This Tamil-cum-Telegu epic-action movie directed by S.S. Rajamouli took the Indian box office by storm in 2015. This movie begins with an evocative scene in which a baby (Mahendra Bahubali) in swaddling clothes appears floating in a river. It is being carried by its grandmother Shivgami, the erstwhile queen of the kingdom of Mahishmati. She would soon succumb to her fatal injuries, but not before ensuring that the child is securely found by a bunch of jungle dwellers. Among them, as expected, a childless couple adopt the baby. Blithely unaware of his true parentage, this child frolics around the river up to his youth (just like Krishna growing up by the bank of the river Yamuna far away from his real parents). In *Baahubali*, the river is formed by a fountain falling from a tall mountain overlooking the village, where Mahendra Bahubali alias Shiva lives. Since his childhood, this boy named Shiva has a strange drive to climb up the mountain. And one day, he finds a mask near the riverbank. The movie shows, with great cinematic effects, how young Shiva climbs up the mountain as if chasing a mysterious maid, the potential owner of the mask. Eventually, this climb would draw him nearer to his birthplace and he would fight for his right as the heir to the throne of Mahishmati.

This story too testifies our assumptions. In place of a supernatural being, Shiva is born in a royal family. His extraordinary physical strength is exhibited when he lifts singlehandedly a colossal Shivalinga and pulls the rope to lift the fallen idol of a cruel king. The movie shows how effortlessly he thrashes the whole army of swarming looters performing tasks comparable to that of a demigod. His mother too is forced to abandon him soon after his birth, and he is smuggled out of Mahishmati through a river. Like the earrings for Karna found in his basket, the flute for Krishna, and the

Qur'an for Satyapir, the river in *Baahubali: The Beginning* would gift young Shiva a mask that would determine his fate. By its rich cinematic craft, and by employing commendable acting performances, this film is simply a retelling of the old mythological narrative paradigm. A report in the *The Hindustan Times* reads:

We all know by now how big a fan SS Rajamouli is of the Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana. A closer look at Baahubali will tell you how the characters are modelled on the superheroes from the epics. But we also realise what an immense debt Rajamouli owes to Ananth Pai of Amar Chitra Katha — so many of the characters seem to jump out of the books of Pai, particularly in the film's imagery. (Mishra, 2021)

Amar Chitra Katha (a franchise that is “synonymous with the visual reinvention of Indian stories from the great epics, mythology, history, literature, oral folktales, and many other sources”) provided Rajamouli, the director of *Baahubali: The Beginning*, with the inspiration for this epic movie. As discussed above, the narrative of this movie fits in perfectly with our mythic paradigm. As the final narrative in this category, let me recount one story that challenges this paradigm. This story appears in the *Mahabharata* too. It is the story of the birth of Bhisma.

King Santanu winced with horror as he saw his celestial wife Ganga purposefully sink their new-born children in a bulging river one after another. He could neither prevent her from doing so, nor could question the propriety of her actions. Before getting married to Santanu, Ganga had clearly put forth her condition that she would leave him if he ever interferes in her affairs or even questions her decisions. Yet, the sight of his offspring drown so was too much for Santanu to bear. He did not, however, utter a single word as he knew, the moment he did so, this heavenly nymph would disappear. Years went by and the king became a silent witness

to the drowning of seven children born to him. When the eighth child was born, Ganga hurried to the river to drown it too. Santanu made a choice this time and asked Ganga, “Why are you killing your own children?” As Ganga was interrupted from her action, she decided to abandon the king immediately, but left the eighth child in his lap.

This story mentioned in the “Adi Parva” of the *Mahabharata* turns the mythical paradigm of the floating children upside down. Like Karna, these babies surrendered to the river were male children, begotten through the union of a human and a celestial. However, instead of saving the abandoned children, Ganga, personification of a sacred river of the same name, drowns seven of her own babies, that too in a river. The trope of a river drowning her children in a river, shows a literal and metaphorical ‘return to the womb’ for the children. However, that is only half of the story. The babies that she had conceived were, in fact, *vasus* (attendant deities of Lord Vishnu), accursed to the ordeal of human life. They had sought the favour of Ganga, a goddess herself, to carry them in her womb as no mortal woman was worthy of such honour. They had entreated her to shorten their suffering by sinking them into the river immediately after birth. The only undrowned child, named Gangadutta (meaning the gift of Ganga), also known as Bhisma, would lead a life full of suffering, and would not beget any children of his own. Looking at this narrative thus, we find that Ganga had saved those she drowned. The river thus acted as the birth-giving mother of those whom she conveyed to the safety of their celestial life. Therefore, our assumptions are vindicated in this narrative too.

Conclusion

We see how the mythic pattern of a floating child keeps floating in the Sanskrit classical narratives, medieval *Puranas*,

folk tales in vernacular languages, comics, music albums, and in the cinematic adaptations. The real hero of the myths concerning the floating child is the river itself that appears in each story without fail, conveying the child to safety.

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7

Anthropomorphism of Rivers in Folk Songs of Gaddis of Chamba District in Himachal Pradesh

Sweta and Alka Lalhall

Saaye Saaye mat kar Raviye, ki minjo tera dar lagda

(Oh Ravi!! Do not burble because I am scared of your sound....)

Introduction

Folk songs act like connecting threads between generations. They are the repository of knowledge about the ways in which people have given meanings to culture and nature around them. Folk songs reveal ‘the way of life’ valued by any group of people at the deepest levels. They are the expressions of constitutive social order of the group — be it gender constructs, ritual hierarchy, social relation, politico-jural systems and the like. Folk songs emerge around material integuments narrating the lived experiences of society, their norms, customs, and behaviour (Turner, 1969). Apart from the seasonal experiences, they underline the socio-spatial relationship among the people of a community. A lot of everyday behaviour and skill are imparted through these folk

songs. They become an instrument of socialization by orally transmitting the schema in which the 'collective' as well as the individual behaviour can be organized. They reflexively make the society an object as well as subject of moods and motivations, socio-political systems, common beliefs, and sentiments. In simple words, folk songs are sets of cultural structures through which identity of the population is lived.

India is the cradle of rich and varied cultures and traditions. The Gaddi tribe is habitants of the state of Himachal Pradesh, India, dwelling mainly along the Dhauladhar mountain range, around the region of Chamba, Bharmour and Dharamshala. Gaddis are traditionally characterized as a nomadic tribe indulged in the occupation of sheepherding. However, adapting to the contemporary lifestyle, most of the people of the tribe have now chosen to settle down in the villages of hilly terrains of the Dhauladhar valley and have adopted agriculture and other convenient occupations. Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh are a 'sub-structure' to the country's rich and plural culture. The Gaddis have weaved their life around the primordial deity Shiva. The cultural meaning of space and time among the Gaddis is deeply rooted in their folk songs. Festivals, marriage rituals, rituals of death etc. are embedded with the narrations and performance of folk songs. They "evoke sentiments and emotions and impel men to actions" (Cohen, 1974). They transgress between the world of social reality and metaphorical world. They contain a symbolic value which creates a group identity.

This chapter attempts to explore the anthropomorphic characterization of the river Ganga and the Ravi in two famous folksongs of the Gaddis of the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh, India. It explores the stimulating and efficacious nature of the river and the cultural memories of the nomadic life of the community conserved in the folk songs. These folk songs draw attention to the value of the

river as a resource for the present generation as a symbol of nurture, and a force of destruction for the future. This chapter looks at the dynamic interdependence of the community and the water body grounded in these songs.

River in Folk Traditions

The river in folk and literary traditions has received immense interest and attention. The river is seen as a “fantasy, or collective fantasy” (Dundes, 1976, p. 1501), and collective knowledge. Water is a ‘total social fact’ (Orlove and Caton, 2010; Strang, 2016). Water is not just an instrument or thing that facilitates sustenance of life. It is not just H₂O as Illich (1985) has pointed out. Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” illustrates the condition of people of colour in that time. The Thames, The Hudson, and not to forget the jewel of Egypt, The Nile have been celebrated in various literary forms (Mane, 2018). The river has always caught hold of human attention — bewildered by its ebbs and flows, its motion, colour, and the sound of water which have struck human senses. In the absence of a modern-day industrial equipment to map, measure and control the water bodies, the relation of the community with their ecology is expressed in the form of idioms of speech to capture the authoritative, ferocious and loveable domain of the water body.

The landscape of Himachal Pradesh has a rich drainage system of rivers. The mountain state of Himachal Pradesh is nourished by the five rivers, viz., the Chandrabhaga, the Sutlej, the Ravi, the Yamuna, and the Beas. Locally known as *khad*, *nallah* or *dariya* based on their depth, the rivers in Himachal Pradesh shape the socio-riverine ecosystem of the region. The rivers not only nourish the landscape of Himachal Pradesh, but they also shape the folk narratives about the human-nature interaction. While the Beas rests as

the holy river in the *Mahabharata*, the Ravi feeds the Gaderan (Gaddi population) in and around Chamba. The expression 'river' is not a mere textual description of a geographical process, neither is it an allegory, a metaphor nor an ornate vocabulary for the community. It has an agency. It has an ability to communicate and act. The river is an extension of the social life of the Gaddis.

The Gaddi songs on rivers represent an active perceptual engagement with their natural landscape. The vocabulary is the craftsmanship of the customary practices and traditions that even today have influence on the socio-cultural lives of the Gaddis. The songs are vessels in which years of feelings, gestures and emotions are preserved. It has given meaning to the existence of the community which lacks written documents of its existence. The community constructs its own accounts of encounters with the rivers. The river, rather than being an object, becomes the subject to peep into the Gaddi worldview. Often when we talk of nature, it is seen in opposition to culture. The river transcends the universal dichotomy between the nature and culture in Gaddi cosmology (Descola, 2012). The communities like Gaddi do not differentiate between nature and culture. The Gaddis' view is shaped by the continuum between nature and culture. The community has socialized with the nature as a part of their living. The river is continuously under construction through the human interaction as expressed in the folksongs. The river even when is an independent entity, emerges "as condensation or crystallizations of activity within a relational field" (Ingold 2004: 333). River is not just a resource among the Gaddis but also a means to organize their identity around it. They partly derive their historicity from it which is evident in the folk songs. The songs address the river as a non-human entity being given a human shape. The songs are in the form of dialogues and conversation between people and the

river containing both facts and values. Like the sound of the waves of the river, the songs represent what people did and felt about the landscape around them. The consciousness of the lyrics itself resonates with meaning and lifestyle of the Gaddis. Here is an example:

Ganga, Gaura, and Shiva: The Cosmogony of Marriage among Gaddis

Nachen Dhudua, bajeterebaje ho... Nachen Dhudua, bajeterebaje ho....

(Gaura asks Shiva to dance to the tunes of his music)

Ho Dhudunacheya ho jatabokhalari ho... Dhudunacheya ho jatabokhalari ho....

(As Shiva dances, his dreadlocks untangle and swing with the music)

Ganga rani je pargathoyio, ganga rani je pargathoyio....

(Ganga appears from Shiva's dreadlocks as he dances)

Ganga Gaura ho paniye jo gayian ho, Ganga Gaura ho paniye jo gayian ho...

(Gaura asks Ganga to come with her to fetch water)

Ganga Gaura ho chur-bhurlaya ho, GanagaGaura ho chur-bhurlaya ho...

(On the way Gaura and Ganga start talking to each other in an angry tone)

Gaurapuchanditulangdikya meri ho, Gaurapuchnaditulangdikya meri o....

(Gaura asks Ganga, "What is your relationship with me?")

Ganga bolndi, aunsaukanteri ho, Ganga bolndiaausaukanterio...

(Ganga tells her, "I am your *Saukan* (Husband's second wife).")

Ganga Gaurasarosladi ho, Ganga Gaura ho sarosladio...

(Gaura is infuriated, and both start fighting)

Ho tutte har chaurasiladi ho, ho tutte har chaurasiladi ho....

(As they fight eighty-four numbers of beads of their necklace start to fall. Here eighty-four (*Chaurasi*) is a reference to a very famous temple of Lord Shiva in Bharmour, Chamba)

Ganga layi go ha Bhagirath chela ho, Ganga layi go ha Bhagirath chela ho...

(Seeing this, Shiva asks Bhagirathi to take Ganga with him)
*Ho Dhudurahi go ha kelamkella ho, ho Dhudurahi go ha kalam
 kella ho...*

(Shiva is left alone without Ganga)
*Nachen Dhudua, bajeterebaje ho... Nachen Dhudua, bajeterebaje
 ho....*

*Ho Dhudunacheya ho jatabokhalari ho... Dhudunacheya ho
 jatabokhalari ho....*

‘*Dhudu/ Dhudua*’ is a parochial epithet ascribed to Shiva by the Gaddis, which literally translates to ‘ashes’, therefore the characterization of Shiva, who applies ashes on his body. Parvati, also referred to as Gauri (*Gaura*) in the song, is the legitimate consort, the beloved of Shiva. Ganga, on the other hand, is depicted in the song as the second wife (*saukan*). The river Ganga becomes the powerful allegory of mundane as well as divine manifestation. Ganga is concealed by Shiva in his hair and comes to her human form only when Shiva dances and lets his hair loose — ‘*Dhudunacheya ho jatabokhalari ho... Ganga rani je pargathoyi ho*’. The ambivalence for the claim of companionship with Shiva resonates with the tension in the conjugal union depicted by the confrontation and dialogue between Gaura and Ganga in the song. Gaura questions the identity of Ganga and their relationship to each other (‘*Gaurapuchanditu lang dikya meri ho*’ which translates as, ‘*Gaura asks Ganga, “What is your relationship with me?”*’), to which Ganga answers, “*aunsaukanteri ho*”. The term ‘*saukan*’, in the native Gaddi language does not amplify the relationship between a man and his second wife but it is the relationship between the two women who claim conjugal relationship with same man (here Shiva).

Gaddi account of marriage is highly influenced by their nomadic life. Sexuality and love are legitimate in a conjugal union. The Gaddi marriage is/was “characterized by polygamy for men and serial monogamy for women”

(Kapila, 2004). The customary practice of having more than one spouse was prevalent among the Gaddis. Polygamy may, however, cause emotional turbulence least to say in a uterine unit. Alongside, the typical mythological narration common to many folk songs, the river is used as communicative tool, representing the Gaddis' conjugal union. The river embodies the mythical nature of marriage, love, and family. The folk song "*Nache Dhudua*" confirms to the case of cosmological extension of groups and representation of social rules of marriage. Although polygamy was practiced among the Gaddis, but the ritual hierarchy of the first marriage was much above the other. There was an expatiated status and legitimacy attached to the first wedding and first spouse.

This folk song embodies the idea of religion, culture, way of life, kinship and family ties and the like. For example, *Dhudu* or Shiva is a pragmatic God in the Hindu belief. Shiva has special status among the Gaddis. He is the God, set apart as sacred yet part of the everyday life. Interestingly, even Shiva may be attracted to a woman outside marriage. The Goddess Parvati is human too. She, like any other woman, begrudges Ganga for captivating Shiva with her beauty. The conflict between the two women over their hierarchy and position in marriage is depicted in the song quiet evidently through the lyrics — '*Ganga Gaurasararladi ho, Ganga Gaura ho sarosarladio...Ho tutte har harchaurasiladi ho, ho tutte har chaurasiladi ho...*', (translated as, 'Gaura is infuriated, and both start fighting, as they fight eighty-four beads of their necklace start to fall'). However, it is Ganga who is made to leave, '*Ganga layi go ha Bhagirath chela ho...*', literally translates as, 'Shiva asks Bhagirathi to take Ganga with him', so that the conjugal unit is not disrupted. However, the song in the end does hint that — '*Dhudurahi go ha killamkilla*' ('Shiva is left alone'), as *Ganga* leaves with sage Bhagirath for earth. The Gaddi women were continuously under similar

stress (as faced by Gaura in the song), when the men left their home for pastoral lands in distant villages. Getting another wife was not uncommon among the Gaddis. The song imports the similar undertone prominent in the households of the Gaddis. It sets the moral precept in its own way by barging into the sacred of their prime deity and delving into the terrain of conjugal tension that even the God might face. The song conveys an intimate knowledge about the community in the most veiled form. It transgresses between the world of social reality and metaphorical world. The communication through songs, and the anthropomorphism of the river makes it evident that even the river has a voice, a speech, a humanly form and is a unit not just physical but social. The depiction of the river in the folk song, just like places and other geographical constructs “offers the opportunity of grasping indigenous conceptions” of the community ‘from inside’ (Sax, 2009: 52). The sentiments resonate with the sentiments of longing and authority over the husband. It also compels us to understand the social organization of the Gaddis. Marriage is to be legitimate. It is a social and moral duty to be fulfilled by the parents towards their daughter. The nature of residence for a woman after marriage is patrilocal and the relationship outside marriage is frowned upon. The river as depicted in the song, breaks the conventional boundaries of a South Asian woman’s image during her course, and claims her space through the gushing water but the gender construct does affect her.

Another folk song goes as:

River Ravi: The Daughter or Disaster or Desire

Saayensayen mat krraviye, minjo tera darlagda....

(O Ravi please don’t make the burbling sound, I fear you...)

Chambe re gale riyeladiye, chamberiyeladaliye...

(You are the necklace of Chamba, you are Chamba's beloved daughter)

Saayensayen mat krraviye...Saayensayen mat krraviye...

(O Ravi please don't make the burbling sound, it scares me...)

Tedhimedhichalteri, sausaunakhre...Tedhimedhichalteri, sausaunakhre...

(You have a zig-zag movement and flow, and you show a lot of tantrums)

Chandetereraviyetu mat karnakhre...

(I beg you to please stop your tantrums)

Terekandevadne jo dilmerakarda... Terekandevadne jo dilmerakarda...

(I wish to settle down by your bank...)

Minjo tera darlagda...

(But I fear you)

Saayensayen mat krraviye...Saayensayen mat krraviye...

(O Ravi please don't make the burbling sound, I fear you...)

Chalchal Raviye tu chambe jai vasna... Chalchal Raviye tu chambe jai vasna...

(Flowing through these hills you'll finally reach Chamba and settle there)

Chambede yalokankanekhel natehasna...

(You will settle there and play and laugh with the people of Chamba)

Tere Chambevasne jodilkarda... Tere Chambevasne jo dilkarda...

(I want to settle down in your Chamba, that's my heart's desire too)

Ki Minjo tera darlagda....

(But, I fear you)

Saayensaayenmat kar Raviye... Saayensaayen mat kar Raviye...

(O Ravi please don't make the burbling sound, I fear you...)

Here the river Ravi is not painted with the ritual practices. It is associated with hyper masculine characters of aggression and power and with feminine passivity of serpentine movements. The folk song shows that people pay close attention to the sounds, movements, gestures, and shape of the water body. It depicts the unmeasurable

human feelings of the community towards the overwhelming natural landscape around the river. The vocabulary is like a meaningful conversation as if one is opening one's heart out and talking to the river. There is plurality in the image created by the vocabulary of the song. In the folk song, "*Saanyensaayen mat kar Raviye...*" the community has collectively labeled the river which by no means is reducing the river to a mere form of ecological representation. The folk song awakens gender constructs prevalent in the Gaddi community.

The folk song does not simplify the river as grossly feminine. The river enjoys a kind of 'multiplicity of selfhood'. The representation of its sexuality through positive image of being the beloved and cherished daughter of Chamba, does not discord with the fact that it is exceedingly self-assertive and fierce when flooded. The persuasiveness to control its fiery form continues as the singer also assigns a definitive kinship tie of a daughter to it. The river is dramatic, holds tantrums, and does not dissolve the plurality of self. The river originates from the mountains of Himachal Pradesh and on its way nourishes the human subsistence. The river parallels the movement of a daughter from her natal home to the patrilocal home creating new alliances across the course. The river is treated like a woman born at a place and moving into another family as a daughter-in-law. The woman is the reproductive resource exchanged through marriage and so is the river.

The river assures the continuity of the community but is not "drained of proper identity" (Spivak, 1985: 362). The river is a reflection of the construct of marriage, farewell ceremony, and gender among the Gaddis. Veena Bhasin posits that the role of the Gaddi women in economic and non-economic activities is very important. The Gaddi women enjoy "social status and sensitivity almost equal to men"

(Bhasin, 1991: 107). Breaking the image of a silent woman, the river puts the community in a subordinate position to request her to calm down and allow them to settle along the banks.

The river is not treated as independent of its ecological property. However, the ecology of the river is wrapped in fear and reverence which is depicted in the lyrics, '*kiminjotera darlagda*', which is translated as 'I fear you'. The natural property of the river is extended to everyday cosmology. The definite nature of the river as dangerous is addressed but also the desire to rest by its bank can be seen in the line — '*terekandevadne jo dilmerakarda*' ('I wish to settle down by your bank').

The folk songs elucidate the Gaddis' world view which is not just "perceived or conceived but also actively lived and receptively experienced" (Casey, 2001: 687). One way of seeing the lyrics of the song is as an authoritative account of meaning that the Gaddis have for the river. The use of these songs — well recognized by the community — is the amalgamation of indigenous concepts to shape the perception in multi-fold ways. The manipulability is a characteristic property of a symbolic system (Morey, 1969). The people may be fearful of the Ravi's burbling and gushing movements when she flows downhill, but at the same time, the Ravi is cherished as the pride jewel of the town of Chamba, as described in the lyrics '*Chambe re gale riyeladiye, chamberiyeladaliye...*', and translated as — 'You are the necklace of Chamba, you are Chamba's beloved daughter'. The river Ravi is seen as a daughter who is welcomed by the people of Chamba town to settle there and live with them forever. The lyrics '*Chalchal Ravi yetuchambe jai vasna... Chambedeyalokannekhehnatehasna...*' are translated as 'flowing through these hills you'll finally reach Chamba and settle there, you will settle there and play and laugh with the

people of Chamba'. The song also becomes an "animated site of social life" of the river and the community (Meyer, 2000). The lyrics of the song are reminiscent of the disasters that it can create, and through speech, it is appeased, praised, and resented. The words also bring out the desperation of the people to settle by the banks of the river despite the continuous fear of being devastated by flooding of the river. The songs become a site of constructing ambiguity in such a way that a single emotion cannot be pointed out. The song becomes "two voices, two meanings and two expressions" (Bakhtin, 1989: 324). There may be many meanings interpreted from the course of the river, only because the audience engages with it in search of meanings.

Conclusion

History suggests that the rivers are not just hydrological entities but one of the major reasons of settlement and cultivation for human civilization. They probably shaped the course of human migration in search of green pastures. Human necessity has been waxed lyrically in many societies. Among the Gaddis, the "river" is represented through a figurative language to describe a plethora of human emotions and human interaction with it. The songs might appear intuitively written, lacking any kind of rational intellect. However, when we look at the songs by placing them in the backdrop of the landscape, identity, relationships, and the sensibility on which they are built among the community, they underwrite our judgmental capacities. A monistic approach to understanding the songs may lead to misreading the meaning that the river has among the Gaddis and other tribal communities in India. The knowledge of people about the environment is conveyed through these melodic inflections of folk songs.

The timelessness of rivers and the Gaddis' dependence

on them is supported by the powerful imageries of the river in the folk songs. The folk songs spark intense images of the river as — its coming to life and playing numerous characters — just like the actors in any performance. The nature of nurture, fertility, chaos, and destruction is poured into the spiritual and personal accounts about the rivers in the folk songs. The folk songs have helped the community manage, address, and communicate about their natural resources. Cumulative and open to adapt, the folk songs are indicators of cultural continuity and co-existence between humans and their ecology. The folk songs may not fall into the descriptions of poetics. They might not be concerned with poetic structure, but, as Raffles (2002) quotes Bachelard (1983: 15), “the language of water is a direct poetic reality”, and there exists, “a continuity between the speech of water and the speech of man”. These songs have a language reflecting the conceptual system of the society living in an environment. The folk songs do not convey meaning just about the rivers but also about how the community develops by conceptualizing a shared meaning of the river. The folk songs are, thus, the social productions of shared meaning attached to the river.

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8

River Narratives and Tribal World View in the Khasi and Jaintia Folklore

I. Amenla Changkija and Surajit Sen

Introduction

Rivers have been at the centre of most folktales around the world. Since rivers sustain life and life-forms with water, they share an important and integral part of any discourse, whether it is oral or written. In this chapter, select river folktales of the Khasis and Jaintias¹ from North-East India have been taken for discussion. North-East India abounds in folk narratives which have a tribal aspect to them making the tales very robust and appealing at the same time. The tales significantly carry immense didacticism and values of faith which certainly store an element of awe in them. Apart from the tribal ethnic animism, the folktales also display a man-nature relationship which often turns reading the tribal river narratives as multi-species ethnography. Cultural consciousness and reminisces of a collective psyche regarding the past history of the tribal communities find traces in the creative folkloric expressions.

Rivers in Khasi-Jaintia Folklore and History

The folk narratives of the Khasis and Jaintias are infused with their history, faith, geography, and cultural practices. Like the many other folklores, these reflect that "... the eternal quest of men to know the truth in the natural surroundings led them to invent the myths in which the rudiments of history can be discerned" (Singh, 1985: 227). The history of the communities has traces in the folktales, and rivers are intricately a part of that history. The Khasi folk narratives on their settlement in the current part of Meghalaya are related to the river Kupli (also spelt as Kupili and Kopili). Nonglait (2012: 36) narrates the folktale as:

On reaching the Kupli river, after a very long expedition, the Khasis found themselves in greatest danger when they could not decide how to cross the river, during which time the enemies were also following after them. It was in such difficult situation that God's helping hand appeared in the form of an eagle which plunged down very swiftly from the sky and took a small child in a sudden. In just after a moment of shock, when the eagle dropped the child across the river, some strong and brave men jumped into the river and managed to reach the other side of the river bank. There, they found the child which was carried beneath the strong and wonderful wings of the eagle, lying unharmed on the grass. Seeing this miraculous act of God, the elderly men decided the right point where everyone could start crossing the river. Over there, they found a secluded, unique and beautiful plateau suitable for permanent habitation. Then they realised that across the river, there is no more need for further exploration... From that time on, the Khasis settled permanently on these hills and no other tribes or nations could encroach into their land ever after.

Here the river becomes the place of demarcation and the narrative in the background of the river reflects a unique relationship between the land and the people in the sense that the placeness is attached to divinity and hence, people

were ready to “give their lives for their own people, to protect their rights and to defend their own land” (Nonglait: 37).

River Kupli in the Jaintia folklore is a goddess and she has a son named U Iale. The river narratives of the Jaintias can be related to their ethnic faith and its assimilation with Hinduism. The river Kupli and her son U Iale were worshipped with human sacrifice which is now performed with goats. Lamare writes: “It seems probable that the practice of sacrificing human victims in Jaintia was of long standing, and was originally unconnected with Hinduism, although when the Royal family converts to Hinduism, the goddess Kali easily have taken the place of the Kupili river goddess” (2016: 109-10). Lamare further adds, “After the execution the dead body, and the heads were thrown into the river” (ibid.: 110). The narratives of the ritual of sacrifice for the river has included the process of colonisation as the annexation of the Jaintia hills by the British in 1835 is attributed to the story of kidnapping of a British subject for the ritual of sacrifice in the river. The river has not lost its reverence in the modern times; people still offer rice and food items and perform certain rituals. “At Nartiang a tank where sacrifices are regularly performed is called Ka Umkoi Kupli or Umkoi Bir Ympa, a pool symbolising the water goddess (ibid: 111).” This river narrative connects the people of a geographical area as inhabitants of the river Kupli by forming an identity. The narrative itself is symbolic of the assimilation of religion and culture of the ethnic faith of the Jaintias and Hinduism which also presents the traces of history.

River and World-view of the Khasis and Jaintias

An interesting folktale revolving around the ethnic religion, language and script of the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya has the river playing the role of a foil. Since the creation of the

world, humans had a divine connection with their creator, *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw*. The humans lived as per the commands of *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw* and could get close to the creator with the help of the Golden Ladder at *U Lum Sohpetbneng*² that would lead to heaven. However, with the violation of the 'covenant' that humans had with his creator, the Golden Ladder was removed by God. This incident absolutely confounded the humans. With no righteous guidance from God, the humans fell prey to evil ways and irrational beliefs. Realising the ignominious lifestyle of the humans, the elders of the Khasi tribe convened a meeting pleading *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw* to restore the 'Golden Age' of their existence. Moved by the appeal of the council, God permitted one man from amongst them to meet him at the summit of a tall mountain, who was to be accompanied by a Dkhar, a non-Khasi man who lived in the plain areas below the 'Land of the Khasis'. The two representatives were instructed by God Himself for eight consecutive days. Among all other teachings of rites, rituals, ways of living, *U Blei* also taught them the alphabet and revealed to them the script. They were then entrusted by *U Blei* to take the documents containing God's instructions and the script back to the earth so that they could propagate God's divine laws and teach the humans the art of writing. While returning to the earth, the river at the foot of the mountain was flooded. Knowing it well that the documents given by God could be destroyed coming in contact with the water of the flooded river, the two men tried their best to save it. While the Dkhar (non-Khasi) tied it to the tuft of hair on his head and swam across the river without getting the document destroyed, the Khasi man, having no such tuft of hair on his head, held it between his teeth and began to swim. Unused to swimming, the Khasi man found himself to be bobbling in the water which resulted in the document getting completely wet and

reducing to a pulp, which he accidentally swallowed. With no document at hand, the Khasi man returned only to be greeted by the wrath of his people. To save his life, the man offered to teach his people what he still remembered. However, not being able to recollect all the teachings of God, the man simplified it. This tale is seen as the reason why the Dkhars have an elaborate written religious text and a script of their own, while the Khasis have a simplified oral religious text and no script of their own. They still feel that had it not been for the flooded river, then they would also have had a proper religious text with a script of their own. Thus, the river is seen as a divider of communities here which has kept the Khasis bereft of a written coded language. This narrative is symbolic of the “oral sense of history and myth”, to borrow the words of Esther Syiem (2011: 29), of the Khasis. Syiem points out that, “Responses to the tale have been accompanied with light-hearted banter concerning the obtuseness of the Khasi recipient. According to many, the tale demonstrates the powerlessness of the Khasi in dealing with a situation that requires quick thinking. Comparisons are inevitably drawn up with the shrewd plainsman who had already anticipated the impending disaster looming in horizon” (2011: 16). Aligning the narrative to the oral mnemocultural practices of the Khasis, Japang opines that, “This represents a practice of internalisation of knowledge which requires an essential domain to store knowledge — in this case it is the faculty of memory” (2020: 115). Thus, this narrative reflects the understating of the quintessential features of the Khasis as a community and their differences with the Dkhars/plainsmen.

“While the old story-tellers apparently did not venture to hazard any explanation of how animals and other living beings came to this world, they fabricated a few stories that tell of metamorphoses, either from one species of being into

another or from animate beings to inanimate ones” (Simon, 1985: 161). The river narratives of the Khasis and Jaintias show that the river is a place of such negotiation and adoption of the metamorphoses. Rivers are often associated with being esoteric, mysterious, dark, evil, magical, revengeful and good. The creatures that live in it are also seen to have similar attributes. Several stories of love are woven intricately with the river as a background in folktales. One such popular tales among the Khasis is that of “Ren and the River Nymph”. Ren was a handsome young fisherman who lived with his old mother. He toiled hard every day to catch fish and sell them in the market. While his friends, who would also go fishing with him, would hardly strike luck on any given day, Ren, on the other hand, would never be empty handed. He was sure to have caught on his fishing rope at least a dozen fish and never went out of luck. This made his friends tease him of being liked by the river fairy for his good looks and who would bless him with such luck in catching fish. With no fish to catch, Ren’s friends looked for another spot and since then Ren was left alone to fish in that place. Once he was alone, the River Nymph (known as Ka Puri³) appeared in front of him. She looked astoundingly beautiful which smote Ren instantly. The Nymph admitted that it was she who lured him to the spot everyday by allowing him to catch fish by the dozens. She confided that she did it because of the pure love she bore for him. Being in love, the two began to meet each other every day when a time came that they could not bear to live separated.

However, Ren was posed with a problem. He could neither leave his mother alone nor live in the depths of the river with the Nymph. Realizing that the Nymph was amphibious, Ren implored the Nymph to leave her magical watery world and live with him and his mother on land. The Nymph agreed on conditions that his hut must be impeccably

clean and the broom must be out of her sight, for if she saw it, then she would leave his house. An agreed Ren ran to his mother informing her about his relation with the Nymph and of her conditions to reside with them. His mother took the responsibility to get the house cleaned and make it completely spick and span. However, in her excitement that her son was to be married to a godly spirit, she forgot to hide the broom from sight. When the Nymph led by Ren arrived at the house, Ren's mother welcomed her in the most befitting manner that could be accorded to a daughter-in-law. However, this happiness was only momentary, for the Nymph caught sight of the broom left behind the door as it was usually kept. Tears of sadness fell from the eyes of everyone. In distress, the Nymph blamed herself for what had happened and ran back to her pool. Wrought in the pangs of separation, the mother could not tolerate to see her son in such agony. She permitted her son to go and live with the Nymph as it was not in their custom to bring their daughter-in-law to live with the family of her husband. This tale asserts the belief that daughters-in-law would be in pain and suffering if they go and live in the house of their husband among the Khasi community, which further strengthens the concept of a matrilineal society where the husband goes to live in the house of his in-laws. Further, the tradition among the Khasis of using the broom to ward off spirits is believed to have originated from this tale, a tradition which is also practiced by other communities to drive evil spirits away. This story depicts a close association of the Khasis with nature. "Water is a resource for human usage and consumption as well as activity. In this narrative, Ren is said to leave his mother to join his wife in her watery abode located at U Wah Ren in Ri-War, the southern slope of Meghalaya. Living with a *puri* (nymph) implies physical absence from human civilization; and yet his *rngiew* (a concept of the human aura, anima or

soul) continues to visit his mother, as he promised, through the sound of the river as it laps on the river bank” (Japang, np⁴).

The story of *U Woh Ryndi* and *Ka Lih Dakha* (also spelt as *Ka Li Dohkha*) of the Jaintias is another example where the river becomes the space of intermingling of the worlds of both the physical and metaphysical entities. *U Woh Ryndi* one day catches a fish which he forgets to eat. The fish gets dried and a beautiful damsel (*Ka Li Dohkha*) appears from there and cleans and cooks for *Woh Ryndi* when he is away from home. One day *Woh Ryndi* hides to find out about the mystery and catches hold of the damsel. When he wants to marry *Ka Li Dohkha*, she consents and asks for her relatives to come. *Woh Ryndi* asks his mother to clean the house anticipating the impending visit of his would-be in-laws to which the mother replies that *Ka Li Dohkha* is not a queen whom she would serve. *Ka Li Dohkha* feels offended and flies away to Sutnga region in the Jaintia Hills. *Woh Ryndi* tries to look for her in the water bodies and finally he finds her in a stream and marries her. Sutnga holds a very important place as all the rulers of the community are from the Syiem of the Sutnga clan who claim to be the descendants of *Ka Li Dohkha*. This connection of *Ka Li Dohkha* with the river makes her a divine being and legitimises the rule of her clan as the (quasi-)divine rulers giving them a place of superiority and authority.

The myths and legends related to Jayanti Devi and Matchyodari again represent the river as a space of mysteries. Jayanti Devi is seen as the incarnation of goddess Durga who was born as a daughter to Raja Jayanta Rai. She was married to a man named Landabar and after the death of the Raja, she took the name Rani Singha and became the ruler. Jayanti Devi got separated from Landabar for having sex during her menstruation. Landabar started staying in Sutnga locality.

A repentant Jayanti Devi later wanted to atone for it and prayed to goddess Bhagabati:

The goddess appeared in her dream and told her, ‘I shall save you. During your menstrual period a girl will emerge from your body as a shadow-image and will enter the stream. She will be eaten up by a Barali fish. Afterwards, Landabar, fishing in the stream will catch it. The fish will give birth to a daughter. She will be known as Matchyodari. Landabar will keep her in his house and live with her. That will redeem your infidelity...’ (Sen, 1985: 176)

Accordingly, Jayanti Devi went to the Sutnga river and Landabar lived with Matchyodari as ordained by the goddess and their son Bargohain became the king of the Jaintias.

History, Myths and World-view in River Narratives

In both the narratives of Ka Li Dohkha and Matchyodari, the river-girls are the ancestral mothers of the Sutnga rulers (which reinforces the legitimacy of matriliney which is practiced till today by the Khasis and Jaintias). Sen (1985: 179) connects this similarity to the adoption of Hinduism by the Jaintia kings and “establishment of diplomatic relations between the Jaintia kingdom and Ahom administration” as “The Braham (sic) priests of the royal court adapted the myth to the new political situation. Of course, it might also be possible that this name was superimposed on an earlier myth.” Sen’s interpretation comparing the two myths reflects changes and assimilation of cultures and faiths as “In the process the earlier tribal legend might have been transformed into a myth as a means of legitimising the new royal family although they were not admitted into *kshatriya* caste because of the rigid caste hierarchy of the Hindus and were regarded as orthodox *sudras*” (ibid); “a Hindu symbol was a convenient measure for legitimising the feudal superstructure on a tribal

base. The aetiological [sic] myth of a miraculous origin was created as the rationale of the new order” (1985: 181). Thus, the retelling/superimposition of the river narrative is subjected to cultural, religious and state politics; however, in both the versions, the centrality of the river as the origin of the Sutnga divine rule is not diminished which reflects that the river is an indispensable part of the cultural psyche and plays a significant role in the formation of the identity of the people.

River, Geography and Culture

Some of the rivers are personified and gendered in the Khasi and Jaintia folk narratives. This shows that, “To the ancients the mountains and streams had life and intelligence” (Simon, 1985: 163). In one narrative, the personified river Umngot and the Umiew indulge in a competition to flow fast in a competition for reaching the plains first from the hills. Simon writes further that:

The competition motif in the river stories recurs in the story of the race between the Lukha and the Lunar in Jaintia Hills and the story extant among the Pnars of the race between the Umngot and the Myntdu. The Myntdu occupies a special place in the heart of the Pnar, and so we are not surprised when we find that *she* triumphs in the race with Umngot. In the Khasi story it is the Umngot that wins against the Umiew. On reaching the plains the Umngot turns his way and that to see where the Umiew was and not seeing her she turns north. This rough horse-shoe bend in the course of the Umngot looks when viewed from the top of the cliff near Lait-tyra on a bright sunny day as the silver neck ornament popular among Khasi female dancers and that is the name given to it by the Khasis — *Rupa Tylli* which has two meaning: ‘silver-piece’ and ‘collar-bone’. (ibid: 164)

The geography of the region is, thus, beautifully woven into a folktale with the cultural motif of a sport/competition.

Thus, the names of the rivers also represent how the river is seen and accepted as a part of the tribal community life of the Khasis and Jaintias. There are several rivers whose names are associated with certain folktales. As an interesting linguistic discourse, names of the rivers thus reflect the world-view and ecological relationships. H. H. Mohrmen (2020) makes an interesting study on the river named Myntdu, which flows through the Jaintia hills in the state of Meghalaya. Its folklores focus on the Jaintia people and the cultural signification of river names in Pnar language. It is an attempt at studying their anthropological, geographical, religious and historical values through folk narratives and cultural knowledge as used in naming the rivers. The river Myntdu is a much revered and well known one that has its origin in the West Jaintia Hills district in Meghalaya. Analysing and tracing its folk narratives attached to the river names in different places through which its tributaries flow unravels much of the beliefs and traditions that revolve among the Pnar speakers of the Jaintia hills districts. Myntdu flows from a village named after the river Mihmyntdu (which means 'Start from Myntdu') which is a town adjacent to Jowai, the district headquarters. A clan of people also are known as the Myntdu which tells us of the intense relationship between the people and the river whereby people hold the river in high reverence so as to be identified in name with the river. The river is held sacred especially by the followers of *Niamtre*⁵ and significant rituals are held there on the banks. *Niamtre*, which means 'Belief of Root', holds nature as the life-giver and hence it is sacred to be attached to the river. This indicates the significance of the river in their lives and such folktales revolve around them to tell different existential attachments which are interwoven with their very *being*. From its originating place, the river flows next around Jowai town. The encircling river is seen as the protector of the town as read in the name *Ka Tawiar*

Ka Takan which means that ‘Which encircles and protects the town’ or ‘the Guardian Angel’. ‘Ka’ is a feminine marker where the river is personified as a female and is worshipped as a deity for the protection that it gives to the inhabitants. Going round the town it flows south where it is called *Ka LamENCHI*. It is a prominent point on the Jowai-Shillong road where a popular site is marked for various sacrifices by the followers of *Niamtre*.

Chka Jwai is one tributary of the Myndtu, and it also shares a confluence with another river named the Myngkrem. Upstream of the river Myngkrem is a part called *Ka Riang Khangnoh* (meaning to pull/take/gather closely) which has a tale of its own. It is believed that *Ka Beipun Rangkit* (the Grandmother Rangkit) died of suicide in that part. Hence, the followers of the *Niamtre* hold the downstream Myngkrem river as unholy. Because of the taboo attached to it following the suicide, people are hesitant to go for fishing and angling activities which they are usually fond of. Another fragment of the Myndtu flowing into the Dawki is called *Tre-iong Riang* (which may be translated as — where the tributary terminates, where the river begins, and the head of the river) where it is segmented to *Thwai U Dhiren* (Dhiren’s pool). The next significant part of the river is called *Mupiah* which supplies drinking water to the whole town of Jowai. Because of the nourishment that it provides, people hold it in sacrosanct and respect. Another important part of the river is *Ka Ram Pyrthai* (the Twin Walls) where Mutong, a deity, dwells. Mutong is believed to be an important goddess in the *Ki Soo Dwar Sooluti* (can be translated as — the Red Door towards Journey). She is also regarded as one of the goddesses who guards and protects the town of Jowai.

Another part of the river is now developed into a scenic tourist spot by the name of *Ka Syntu Ksiar* which means ‘The Golden Flower’. A tale revolves that a mother by the name of

Ka Syntu Laloo from the ĩawchibidi clan was working in the fields leaving her son to play alone in a nearby place. Busy in the field, she forgot to mind her son that by the time she remembered and looked at where he was playing, he was nowhere to be seen. Panicked she ran looking for him and found that he had drowned. Numb founded the mother's grief was inconsolable as she could not bear the loss. So she jumped into the river and died. A few days later after the incident, a beautiful golden flower appeared in the middle of the river and hence the name *Ka Syntu Ksiar* (The Golden Flower) came into popular use.

Another part of the river is *Ka Madiah Kmai Blai* (meaning — the maternal uncle who earns for the family). The role of the maternal uncle in the Khasi-Jaintia matrilineal society is important as he is the caretaker of his sisters and their children. True to its significance, the river is connected by an interesting narrative of a great warrior and freedom fighter from the Jaintia Hills, *U Kiang Nangbah*, who was born into the *Soo Kpoh* clan and faced the British subjugation. People of the region were taxed illegally and they were weary of being dominated by the white outsiders. They wanted to fight them off but were leaderless at that time. So, in order to choose a leader, the inhabitants of the twelve *elakas*⁶ (also called *Doloi*) met on the banks of the river to choose from amongst themselves a leader to fight the White masters. The twelve *elakas* consisted of different administrative tribal regions comprising the erstwhile Jaintia kingdom. In their meeting, *U Kiang Nangbah* was elected as the leader. In order for him to be accepted as the leader, he needed the blessings of the Gods and the ancestors. To prove himself as the divinely chosen one, he dove into the river and brought out with him a twig that branched into three after it was kept for sometime in the water. He had explanations for what each branch of the twig symbolized. The main twig before branching into three

symbolized the land of the twelve *elakas* that represented the Jaintia kingdom. For the three branches, the first one stood for unity of the land, the second for love towards one's country, and the third for the necessity of having trust in extending help towards one another. At this explanation, the people were convinced that he had the blessings of the Gods and their ancestors to lead them in their fight. As their leader he fought courageously but the rebellion was suppressed by the British who captured him. He was hanged to death on December 30, 1862 at Iawmusiang market, central to the town of Jowai. Thus, the great freedom fighter from Jaintia Hills, *U Kiang Nangbah* is remembered for his sacrifice towards the region and is even associated with the tributary of the Myntdu, *Ka Madiah Kmai Blai* which, as a living deity, divinely ordained his leadership among his people. In this narrative of the river, an inter-mingling of myth and history is very prominent.

The part of the river that flows near Ialong in Jowai is known as *Ka Kaiksoo* (meaning the Grandchild) which the Dhar clan among the Jaintias claim and worship as their deity. In the Raid Tuber region in the Jaintia Hills, it is known by different names like *Sahksaw* (meaning Where Dogs Reside), *Sahpsen* (meaning Where Snakes Reside) and *Ka Kchaid Rynji* (Water Fall) in different areas each having significant meaning to their life form. The region has the highest concentration of the indigenous faithfuls and hence goes by different names which have significance to their credence.

As it flows into Bangladesh, the people bordering both the countries call the Myntdu as *Ka Tisang* (it connotes a place where nothing wrong can happen). The special connection that the Myntdu has with the people and their cultural practices and beliefs can be assuaged from the name given lovingly to her as *Ka Beipun* (the Grandmother) by the people

living downstream. This holds meaning in symbolizing the grandmother as the most important member in the family and is the central figure in their matrilineal households.

However, even the modern minds have constructed urban folklores about the rivers. We can cite the narrative collected by Ms. Medapyndapshisha Marwein⁷ which goes as:

Wahreng, a river flowing under the Kynshi to Nongstoin road bridge near Lad Myriaw has its own dark tale. Every year during the monsoon season, the river grows bigger and swallows up the adjoining paddy fields. Its greenish coloured water would turn red and the people out there call it 'Ka Umsaw'. Accidents happen here very often. A car or two would jump into the river and people living in Kynshi would point hands at a river serpent that lives under the bridge. This river serpent only appears when the Umsaw covers the road bridge and would claim the lives of many who dared to cross it. "It'll keep flooding and the rain won't stop until the Umsaw and its bseiñ wah (river serpent) devours a life or two", my grandfather would tell me every time I visit Kynshi. You could see it from Mawria, the Umsaw gulping every last paddy field and left to us only the small hills where our houses were built. "It looks as if we're next to a huge lake or perhaps near the beach", Meirit Dhom would chuckle. For years, it has been happening. Every time the Umsaw covers the bridge, a car along with its passengers gets eaten up by this river serpent. Once it has had its fill, the rain stops and the river returns to its greenish hue, some bodies might turn up in some distant shnong but some are never found. They say if you pass through the bridge at night, you'd see the spirits of the river serpent's victims, whose bodies were recovered, roaming around in search of the others whose dead bodies are yet to be found.

Conclusion

Now, if we look into all these folktales, we can notice that all of them have something or the other associated with the river and the river species. In our present-day world, which is driven

by scientific rationalism, the fantastic creatures of the river as described in the tales seem absolutely unimaginable and unbelievable to many. However, what we fail to realise with our ever-progressive scientific mind-set is that our ancestors were very close to nature. Our ancestors did understand that the survival of the humans on the earth depended on the survival of the other animal creatures and together they must fight against the evil forces. They definitely did understand the importance of maintaining a healthy ecosystem. With time, as humans began to grow more civilized, they broke the knot that perhaps tied them with the other species of nature. Stories such as these began to be replaced with adventures of super humans and animals which only formed part of a visit to the zoo. Our stories of the past are linked culturally to us. They describe the way our ancestors thought and worked. No species was then seen as big or small in their abilities. They all had an identity of their own. Also, there seem to have been a deep communion between the humans and the other species. They not only could converse with each other, but could also get married and have progeny, even if it was in a mutant state. The folktales narrated here reveal that human feelings and emotions were also common among the other species. Thus, animals and humans formed part of the larger spectrum which comprised of this world — the Great Chain of Being. From the aforementioned folktales it is evident that the animal species and the non-animal entities have a special bonding with the humans. While the humans saw them as objects of awe, whether in divine form or otherwise, these species looked upon humans as themselves, so much so that conjugal relationships could be easily carved between them. The folktales take this concept of commonality to a different level, to a barrierless sphere.

In these tales, the river stands as a central trope in the discourse between humans and the animal world. It acts

as the conduit through its narratives. The river not only hides or provides shelter to both humans and animals, but it also connects them together. As a narrator, the river is unprejudiced as it is a witness to their communion. In a way, the river becomes a living entity which in spite of the “speechlessness” does become a means of expression. It is culture personified. It reflects, through its crystal water, the ethos and philosophy finely twined with values and beliefs of the tribal people. The river is central to an understanding of these tales. In these tales, the rivers, animated or personified through its animals or watery spirits, stand for love, faith, revenge, wrath, animosity and friendship.

Therefore, it will not be wrong to state that rivers carry much of folk narratives and cultural knowledge and it is best summed up in the words of H. H. Mohrmen, a great and enthusiastic local scholar who has contributed much to this information and knowledge in one of his numerous articles in *The Shillong Times* (August 17, 2020), a local newspaper:

Rivers no matter how big or small they are, have their own charm which fascinates people and that that is why some describe rivers as majestic, magnificent, gorgeous and what have you. In the tribal culture rivers are not just rivers; they are held in high esteem and they are even worshipped as deities. ... [The] rivers... have stories. The stories are not inert but people continue to make stories about their connections with the river. In every river that flows from the hills to the plains, it is not only water that flows in the river but stories too flow seamlessly along the river.

Notes

1. The Khasis and the Jaintias (also known as Pnars) are tribal communities of Austro-Asiatic origin residing in the state of Meghalaya who practice matriliney. Khasi conceptually is a collective of seven clans, namely, Khyntiam, Pnar, Lyngngam, Maram, Bhoi, War and Diko. They traditionally believe in the

concept of *ki ksuid lum ksuid wah* (spirits of the hills and rivers). For more details, see *The Philosophy and Essence of Niam Khasi* by J. Kerrsingh Terring, 2012.

2. The place is located on a hill top near the Shillong city. It is believed to be the naval of the earth. People of the ethnic faith (*Niam Khasi*) still perform rituals there.
3. *Ka Puri* can be translated as mermaid as well. Khasi people believe that there are *puri lieh* (white mermaids) and *puri long* (black mermaids). The colours signify that the *puri lieh* are compassionate and forgiving while *puri long* are volatile, dangerous and often kill humans by drowning them in water. Ka is a prefix to mark the female gender and U is the prefix for the males. The word *puri* may be a derivative form of Bangla *pari* meaning a nymph.
4. Mr. Auswyn Winter Japang, personal correspondence, 30 Oct. 2021. Mr. Japang interestingly finds a male daily-wage labourer from Shillong city who claims to have married a white river-nymph (*puri lieh*) in an interview on 12 July 2019.
5. The ethnic tribal faith of the Pnars
6. Adopted from Bangla, the word *elaka* means area or region of chieftains.
7. Collected through email correspondence of the informant on 7 Oct. 2021

NB. We are grateful to Mr. C. Shylla, Ms. Kanka Sayoo and Mr. Auswyn Winter Japang for translating the concepts and word-meanings in this chapter.

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9

Gods and Bazaars Across the River

Representation of the Ganges in Eighteenth Century Bengali Pilgrimage Narrative *Tirthamangal*

Arkadeb Bhattacharya

Introduction

The Ganges offers an indispensable window for understanding the social and cultural past of South Asia. The rich tradition of myths and lores surrounding the river does not put a straightforward relationship with the dominant political and social orders of past. On the one hand, mass pilgrimage to sacred sites along the river has defied hierarchical social structures, whereas on the other, emperors and dynasties of past who repeatedly engaged in battles over the control of the river valley, could never afford to disregard the deeper imprints of cosmology, myth and broader cultural perceptions of the river nurtured in scriptures, arts and oral traditions (Sen, 2020: 8). Though hydraulic models of top-down Oriental despotism, popularised by theorists from Karl Marx to Karl

Wittfogel (Wittfogel, 1957), have now been discarded by scholars, irrigation and redistribution of the riverine water were always crucial to various political regimes of South Asia down to the British colonial state, all of which were built upon the surplus generated from the peasant economy of the Gangetic valley. Variegated interactions between the river and the human landscapes reflect upon the socio-economic aspects of South Asian history at large. In addition, the mythical and historical significance of the river indicates how it has been worshipped as a divine manifestation and fought over as a political icon throughout the past. In this sense, the Ganges itself is hardly limited to a natural entity, but becomes “reflexive extension of something akin to a uniquely Indian consciousness” (Sen, 2020: 6).

However, cultural perceptions of the river are surprisingly heterogenous, each habitat having its own microhistory. Taking up a travel narrative from the eighteenth-century Bengal, this chapter seeks to understand how the Ganges and its tributaries, as well as the topographic and socio-economic landscapes along their courses were understood and reflected upon within the contemporary cultural milieu. The select narrative for the purpose titled *Tirthamangal* is an account of a pilgrimage undertaken by Krishnachandra Ghosal, brother of Gokulchandra Ghosal, a powerful managerial and landed elite of mid-eighteenth-century Calcutta. Krishnachandra, along with a large group of followers, travelled upstream through the Ganges to perform *trayasthali sraddha* rituals¹ at the three sacred sites of Gaya, Banaras (Kashi) and Prayag (Sen, 1916). The narrative — composed by his physician Bijayram Sen — was fashioned on the forms of traditional *Mangalkavya*² poems, but simultaneously provided empirical details on travel recording minute facts about the sites visited and the activities performed there.

Historians generally assume that the regional languages

of South Asia, except imaginary voyage of the messengers in the *sandeshakāvyas*³, did not produce any travel text comparable to those composed in East Asia, or in the Arabic-speaking world, until at least the late-eighteenth or early-nineteenth centuries (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 1996: 131-32). This argument stems from an obsessive comparison between the pre-colonial and colonial textual narratives, taking colonialism decidedly as the point of rupture in socio-cultural consciousness and literary forms of South Asia. However, in reality, literary-cultural spaces in South Asia gradually changed over the centuries even before the colonial state was implanted. To understand the process, this chapter simultaneously engages with the problematics of the politico-economic context in which the pilgrimage narrated in *Tirthamangal* was undertaken, and the itineraries and logistical supplies that facilitated the journey. It focuses on representative strategies through which the river was understood and reflected upon in the text with special focus on the markets and sacred sites along the Ganges as constitutive elements of the riverine itinerary.

The Setting

Since the early medieval period, literatures and inscriptions from the region of Bengal referred to the managerial and scribal communities as ubiquitous figures in the administrative sectors of the states (Gupta,1996). They provided the successive Sultanate and Mughal governments in Bengal with basic managerial skills required for the smooth functioning of state machineries. Learning Persian was a prerequisite for the scribal employment, but most of the employees were simultaneously trained in poetry, literature, history, and technical skills of accounting and fiscal management (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 2011). They

served as local administrators of revenue collection and kept the revenue records — besides investing in trade, lending agrarian and mercantile credits, acquiring *zamindari* estates, and sometimes providing with mercenary services as well. Their activities consisted of both military and bureaucratic services which constituted a “composite portfolio” together (Chatterjee, 2010: 455). Many of the managerial families continued their service from one regime to another with ease. The 18th-century regional polities which succeeded the Mughal empire were also in high demand of their ‘practical expertise’ (Bayly, 1999: 65-73). During the brief period between 1765 and 1772, when the British East India Company employed Indians as subordinate officials in the administration of Bengal and Bihar, the managerial families found new opportunities to execute. Krishnachandra Ghosal, the patron of *Tirthamangal*, belonged to such a managerial brahmin family. Krishnachandra and his brother Gokulchandra capitalized their connections with prominent officials of the British East India Company, invested in commerce with European partners, and also skilfully managed ‘information, coercion, capital and credit’ as managerial agents of the Company administration (Curley, 2020: 84).

Though Ghosal family belonged to the uppermost *kulin*⁴ echelon of the Bengali Brahmins, misconduct of an ancestor in the 17th century resulted in degradation of the family name from Ghosal to Pathak depriving them of the *kulin* status. In eighteenth century, when Kandarpa Ghosal, the father of Krishnachandra acquired massive fortune through trade and managerial services, the *kulin* status was retrieved once again. Kandarpa came from a modest background, but through execution of managerial and accounting skills, he acquired lease on sizeable revenue collections on behalf of the British East India Company. Kandarpa was one of the ten Indians who successfully bid for the leasehold to collect revenues in Company’s lands

around Calcutta in August 1759. He also served as a banker of Ramkishor Tagore and Rammohan Tagore who purchased short term revenue leaseholds in Burdwan (Curley, 2018, p. 254). Kandarpa's younger son Gokulchandra was appointed as the *banian* of Harry Verelst in 1754. He helped Verelst in keeping and auditing Persian land-revenue accounts, and traded in personal interests of the latter (Marshall, 1976: 45). When Verelst was appointed as the governor of Chittagong Council in 1760, Gokulchandra acquired *zamindari* estates near Dacca and Chittagong. After his father's death in 1765, Gokulchandra also became the manager of the undivided family estate. Moreover, he lent credits and traded in partnership with both Indian and European merchants, and rented out residential properties in Kolkata. Briefly in 1760s, he was also employed as an Indian official in the East India Company's revenue administration. With appointment of Verelst as the Governor of Bengal (1767-69), Gokulchandra reached the peak of his fortune. (Curley 2020: 83-84)

Tirthamangal is an account of a pilgrimage funded by Gokulchandra and undertaken by Krishnachandra along with a large group of followers for performing *trayasthali sraddha* (which consists of mainly rituals for the ancestors) at Gaya, Banaras and Prayag. Following the narrative pattern of traditional *Mangalkavya* texts, the story began with a divine intervention. It says, one night, Lord Shiva appeared to Krishnachandra in his dream and asked him to perform the pilgrimage (Sen, 1916: 32, verses 8-9). Tony Stewart observed that the divine intervention seems to be a 'paratextual device' which initiates a framework for the unfurling of the plot in the *Mangalkavya* narratives (Stewart, 2004: 4, 8-9). In Ray Bindod's *Manasamangal*, composed in the seventeenth century, Goddess Manasa appeared similarly in the dream of the merchant-protagonist Chand and told him to travel to Sri Lanka. In the narratives of *Chandimangal*, Goddess Chandi also appeared before Kalketu in person and told him

to establish a city after reclaiming the forest (Mukundaram, 1956: 53-74). However, Gokulchandra was delighted to hear about the dream. He said to his elder brother:

Listen to me! Organise the fleets and travel to Banaras to worship the deity of Kashi. Besides, this will serve three purposes through one venture. Take everyone along with you who wishes to perform the pilgrimage, help them to do the *sraddha* rites in Gaya, provide them with the expenditure for the journey, and shower them with kindness. (Sen, 1916: 32, verses 12-13)⁵

Bijayram Sen, the poet of *Tirthamangal*, did not illuminate on the ‘three purposes’ which could have been served through ‘one venture’. Nagendranath Basu, the editor of the text, assumed that Krishnachandra also intended to collect political news from the northern part of South Asia on behalf of the Company’s government (Basu, 1916: 23-24). However, David Curley suggested that Gokulchandra utilized the pilgrimage to collect information about the price of opium and other goods which his agents were importing from Bihar and the territory of the Raja of Banaras for a partnership nominally organised by Daniel Hoissard and financed largely by Verelst (Curley 2018: 246).

However, the primary purpose of the pilgrimage was to perform the *sraddha* rituals in three sacred sites which was supposed to liberate the deceased ancestors from the karmic residue of their sins and secure for them the afterlife in heaven or happiness through rebirth. Obsequies includes oblation to gods (*homa*), ritual offering of water (*tarpana*) to gods and ancestors, offering of food-balls (*pinda*) to nourish the subtle bodies of the ancestors, and gifts and feasts given to Brahmins (*daan*) (Kane, 1953: 334-36, 655). In the 17th century, Narayan Bhatta, a Brahmin scholar of Maratha origin in Banaras, had composed *Tristhalisetu* — a guide to *sraddha* rituals in the three sacred sites. Throughout the eighteenth

century, Bhatta's work was considered as a guideline for the *sraddha* rites and rituals. Krishnachandra himself followed important injunctions of this text (Desai, 2017: 35-37, 73-79).

While performance of obsequies at the sacred sites was supposed to procure both spiritual and this-worldly benefits, helping the needy people to accomplish the pilgrimage could escalate the religious merit of the pilgrims as well. According to the *Dharmashashtra*, "a wealthy man who enables another to perform pilgrimage by providing his own money or conveyances gets one-fourth of the merit of the pilgrimage" (Kane, 1953: 578). While Krishnachandra took a number of enthusiastic people along with him to the sacred sites, some people were also employed during the tour to manage essential tasks associated with worldly businesses and religious rituals. Scholarly *kulin* Brahmins were prominent among the party. Shibashankar Bhattacharyya 'Vidyavagisha', described as the "master of all (ritual) actions", guided correct performance of the rituals (Sen, 1916: 35, verse 39). Nayalankar Sarbabhauma, the Brahmin referred only through his title, was described as 'a very learned pundit' who 'knew all the shastras' and had 'an exemplary character' (Sen, 1916: 35, verse 40). Dwija Biswanath, another Brahmin, was appointed as the *munshi*, and assigned with the duty of disbursement of funds and keeping accounts. He was described as the "doer of all worldly work". The poet also mentioned that the *munshi* was proficient in Persian and acted as the spokesman of the party while talking to the upcountry people (Sen, 1916: 34-35, verses 27-29). Various subordinate officials and labourers like sepoy, musketeers, doorkeepers, boatmen and rowers were employed as well (Sen, 1916: 35, verses 30-36). Besides men with specific tasks, some of Krishnachandra's relatives — including a brother of his late father, and several of his mother's sisters — also joined the pilgrimage. The men who received charity included various groups of Brahmins,

celibates, Vaishnavas and physically disabled. Bijayram mentioned that the representatives of all thirty-six caste groups of Bengal were included among the pilgrims who were given supplies of food (Sen, 1916: 36, verse 47).⁶ Other pilgrims joined when the fleets stopped at various riverports of Bengal. The poet himself joined the pilgrimage on its eleventh or twelfth day, near Dighagram on the Bhagirathi-Hooghly river. He was an ayurvedic practitioner, appointed for treating ailment among the pilgrims (Sen, 1916: 43-44, verses 145-53).

The poet mentioned a total of twenty-one fleets that carried the pilgrims, among which Krishnachandra travelled in a budgerow. The flotilla proceeded upstream through the Bhagirathi-Hooghly river up to the grain market at Bhagwangola near the juncture of the Jalangi and the Padma rivers, and then continued upstream through the Ganges up to Patna. During the initial few days, Krishnachandra stopped at the riverports to offer worship at the local temples. From the markets at Gokulganj, provisions of rice, pulses, oil, salt, clarified butter, timber and tamarind were stored in the fleets (Sen, 1916: 40, verses, 115-18). Krishnachandra also met with many influential men of Calcutta, such as Raghunath Mitra and Nabakrishna Deb⁷. Enthusiastic pilgrims from different localities joined the party during this phase. At night, the pilgrims stayed either at the palaces of the local notables, or camped near the river.

In Murshidabad, the Nawab of Bengal arranged a military escort for the party. Following the westward course of the Ganges, the fleets then arrived at the city of Rajmahal in the Chota Nagpur Plateau. Krishnachandra met the *faujdar* of the city, and stayed there for two nights. The party then resumed to travel through the Ganges up to Patna. En route, the tribal people near Rajmahal offered a present of bananas to Krishnachandra, who in turn, gifted them with a rupee.

The party also visited the fort of Munger, and engaged in a quarrel at the toll-post near Barh. At Patna, Krishnachandra met the politically influential men of the city, arranged for a military escort, and sent his budgerow and three other boats to Banaras. The pilgrims then travelled through overland routes to Gaya. From Fatwa, a short distance downriver from Patna, they followed the pilgrims' track to Gaya by the Phalgu river. Gaya, subjected to the Company's dual government of Bihar, was under the revenue management of the Raja of Tikari. The overland journey to Gaya was slowed down because of the scorching sun of summer. Bijayram mentioned twenty-six toll stations on the route from Patna to Gaya. After performing the *sraddha* rites for more than two weeks, the pilgrims departed through the overland road up to the Shon river. After crossing the river, they entered the town of Dehri within the territory of the Raja of Banaras. Balwant Singh, the then Raja of Banaras, was nominally a subject of the Nawab of Awadh. But he was also under the protection of the British East India Company. After leaving Dehri, the party was stopped at a toll station near Sasaram. But they obtained a duty-free passage by showing the Company's writ. Also, the writ secured duty-free passage thereafter at different toll stations. From Sasaram, the pilgrims travelled through the Grand Trunk Road until they reached the Ganges opposite to Banaras. They crossed the river by boat and arrived at the Bengali neighbourhood (*Bangalitola*) in Banaras. En route, the party was accommodated in palaces of the locally influential men.

After staying in Banaras for a few days, the pilgrims travelled westward on the Grand Trunk Road up to the holy confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna at Prayag. Prayag was under the direct administration of the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II. Though Krishnachandra interacted with the influential and scholarly Brahmins of Prayag, Bijayram did

not mention any meeting with the administrative officials of Shah Alam II. After a short stay in Prayag and the performance of the rituals of *parvana sraddha* and *panchatirtha* pilgrimage, the pilgrims returned by rented boats to Banaras. They visited the market of Mirzapur en route. After installing a Shiva *linga* in Banaras and performing other activities lasting several weeks, the pilgrims hurriedly departed for home to escape the seasonal epidemic of smallpox.

On the eighteenth day of the Bengali month *Sravan*, the pilgrims travelled by boat to Ramnagar where Balwant Singh, the Raja of Banaras, invited Krishnachandra for an audience. From next morning, boats continued downstream on the Ganges. On the way, the pilgrims visited the city of Gajipur and the British settlements in Danapur. At night, they either camped near the shore or stayed in the boat. After an uneventful river journey, the party reached Patna. Most of the pilgrims were dismissed from Patna with a travel allowance for their homeward journey. Krishnachandra stayed with his associates for a month in Patna, drew up his accounts at the house of a writer, and reconfirmed the relationship established previously with Shitab Ray, the deputy governor of Patna, and other 'great men' of the city. The party then travelled from Patna to Fatua in palanquin (*palki*), and thereafter in rented boats downstream through the Ganges. En route, they engaged in a non-fatal affray with the guards in the toll station of Barh, and visited several sacred sites and markets, especially near Munger and Murshidabad. The party finally returned to Calcutta through the course of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly, following a detour in Shantipur, at the house of Shibashankar Bhattacharyya Vidyavagisha, the *kulin* Brahmin who guided the ritualistic activities throughout the pilgrimage.

Bijayram's account described the itinerary in a chronicler narrative style with empirical detailing of the day-to-day

activities. The journey was dependent on a well-developed network of labour and rent market in which everything — ranging from boats and food provisions to mercenary soldiers and scholarly brahmins — could have been acquired in the northern parts of South Asia by encashing the drafts issued in Calcutta. Noticeably, except Prayag, the pilgrims travelled only within the territory under the Company's influence, and the Company's writ facilitated the party to evade payment of toll taxes. Security threat was a matter of anxiety at certain places, but the party promptly arranged military escorts. The itinerary combined both overland and riverine routes. While the pilgrims travelled from Gaya to Banaras, and thereafter to Prayag through overland routes, they returned from Prayag to Calcutta exclusively through the Gangetic course. Moreover, the party travelled through a more or less standardized itinerary which included many pilgrimage sites as well as detour to important markets and other non-sacred sites of importance.

Tirthamangal was composed in 1770, but not widely circulated thereafter. In 1769, Verelst went back to England, and Gokulchandra started to face mounting difficulties. Gokulchandra's income from land revenue also suffered drastically because of the famine of 1769-70. In 1779, when Krishnachandra's son Jayanarayan took charge of the estate after Gokulchandra's death, most of the urban properties were sold to settle the debts of the family (Curley 2018: 253-62). In the early 20th century, when Bangiya Sahitya Parishad started publishing the old Bengali manuscripts, Nagendranath Basu edited and annotated the first edition of *Tirthamangal*. While some historians situated *Tirthamangal* in a new form of historical *Mangalkavya* literature that began to develop in the 18th century Bengal (Chatterjee, 1999), others pointed out the features of Persian travelogues in its narrative content (Sen, 1998: 32-38). This chapter focuses

on a different issue, namely, representation of the Ganges in the text patronized by a *nouveau riche* of early colonial Bengal, assuming that it would unfurl a new perspective on the socio-cultural perceptions of the regional elites in early modern South Asia.

The Ganges and Other Rivers in *Tirthamangal*

In popular imagination, the Ganges and the pilgrimage landscape along its course have remained vivid throughout history. Besides being the connecting link between various sacred and politico-economic sites, the river itself is also venerated as a sacred object of worship, usually together with its many tributaries. In every region, local tributaries of the Ganges are taken into the making of socio-cultural perception of geography where sacred and empirical aspects overlap. *Mangalkavyas* of medieval Bengal, composed as a popular performative literature narrating imaginary voyages of the merchants, convey significant insight into how regional societies, over *longue durée*, perceived the river in the larger framework of cultural milieu. In the *Mangalkavyas* of the 16th century and 17th century Bengal, representation of the rivers is embedded obliquely in narrative segments. The merchant-protagonists, usually destined to Sri Lanka, travelled from an urban centre of southwestern Bengal through an eastward tributary of the Ganges, and then the southward Gangetic course of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly. Narrative contents are usually conventional and articulated many fictional details. Both in the river and at sea, merchants encountered bizarre sights and fabulous predators.⁸ Moreover, since the 16th century, Bengal region, the deltaic course of the Ganges, gradually shifted eastward. Southward course of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly became increasingly unnavigable, whereas the south-eastward course of the Padma emerged as

the nodal channel of trade and transport (Eaton, 1993: 194-227). But, the Bhagirathi-Hooghly river, associated with the sacred sites and myths of long-settled centre of Brahmanical culture in the western part of Bengal, possibly transformed into some kind of a cultural icon, which conventional *Mangalkavya* narratives adhered to as the main itinerary of their protagonists.

On the other hand, *Mangalkavyas* of the 16th century and 17th century Bengal also occasionally mentioned some empirical information about the rivers. Chand, Dhanapati and Srimanta, the merchant-protagonists of *Manasamangal* and *Chandimangal* narratives respectively, usually began their voyages from a local canal connected to an eastward tributary of the Ganges, following which they entered the course of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly. They passed through several sites of commercial importance and sacredness along the river. Tribeni, Indrani, Nabadveep, Nemai Tirtha and Sanket Madhava featured regularly in the narratives as sacred sites, whereas the merchants loaded their ships with provisions from the commercial centers of Saptagram, Hijuli, Mathayari, Shantipur, Halishahar, Betar, and Hooghly. In Bipradas Pipilai's *Manasamangal* and Mukundaram Chakravarti's *Chandimangal*, both composed in the late 15th century, the protagonists travelled through similar itineraries which corroborates to the 16th century map of the deltaic Gangetic route drawn by the Portuguese traveler De Barros. However, in the 17th century, this older route became increasingly unnavigable. Consequentially, the protagonists in the 17th century *Manasamangal* narrative of Ketakdas Kshemananda travelled through a slightly different route, in which various canals connected the unnavigable parts of the river. Moreover, changes of the Gangetic course made the port-city of Satgaon, the largest trading emporia of western Bengal, unreachable for larger ships which were soon replaced by

downriver ports at Betar and Hooghly. Seventeenth century *Mangalkavya* narratives described these two ports with great importance (Ghosh, 2018: 156-162).

The merchants either witnessed something bizarre, or underwent a shipwreck near the confluence of the Ganges and the Bay of Bengal. In *Chandimangal*, Dhanapati lost six of his seven ships in Mogra near the confluence, and in *Mansamangal*, Chand suffered a similar shipwreck near the coastline in the imaginary Deep of Kali (*Kalidoho* in Bangla). Both Mogra and the Deep of Kali are transformative sites in-between the river and the sea. They suggest a stage of liminality, a place and period of transition that the merchants underwent. Hitherto, they had travelled through a familiar riverine landscape following which they stepped into the boundless sea with no identifiable landmark. In between these two zones — the familiar and unfamiliar — merchants underwent a transformation. They lost their ships as they stepped into another realm (Curley, 2008: 129-30). Both Mogra and the Deep of Kali were characterized by turbulent waves, rushing water and hailing thunderstorm. As planned by the goddesses, all the major rivers from different corners of the subcontinent came and merged with the Ganges at these places. Mukunda gave a vivid description of the divinely ordained process in *Chandimangal*:

River Mandakini came down from the heaven. The Bhagavati came up from the depths along with many makaras. The Ganga with its powerful waves surged along with the destructive Bhairavi. All the sixteen major rivers came quickly, as did the Bahuda and Vipasha. All the tidal rivers came together as one. It seemed as if all the rivers had been pulled there by ropes threaded through their noses. By Chandi's orders the river Brahmaputra joined the others. Abhaya (Chandi) looked on curiously from the back of her lion. (Chakravarti, 2015: 225-26)

It should be noted that the 16th and 17th century *Mangalkavyas* were not purposefully composed as narratives of travel. They constituted a part of the larger performative-literary corpus — loosely categorized as *panchali sahitya* — supposed to be performed with theatrical and musical accompaniments in front of a rural peasant audience (Chatterjee, 2009: 90, 93). Though these narratives were cognizant of the riverine routes as well as changes within the river courses, real and mythical contents were seamlessly blended there together.

Tirthamangal, composed in the late-eighteenth century, shifted from many conventions of the traditional *Mangalkavyas*. It is a conscious first-person narrative of travel narrating factual information. The Ganges appears in *Tirthamangal* as the prime itinerary of the pilgrimage and the central narrative trope. However, in contrast to the detailed description on the sacred and commercial sites travelled through, narrative description on the characteristics of the river is scattered in the text. Sudipta Sen (1998) argued that *Tirthamangal*, fashioned on the Persian travel narratives, understood the journey only in terms of a ‘passage of authority’ from and to ‘various specific sites of interactions — markets, temples and hospices — and audience with distinguished personages.’ It was hardly a geographer’s account. Sen suggests that early modern South Asia was a heterotopic world bereft of the notion of a ‘national economy’ or ‘national cartographic space’ (Sen, 1998: 32-33). The only territorial identity that connected various cities and sacred sites was contingent to pilgrimage, as:

A significant territorial identity that linked the cities of Murshidabad, Dacca, Patna, and Hugli (and, in the later eighteenth-century, Calcutta) with the holy city of Banaras was pilgrimage, especially those that travelled up the Ganges.

Banaras was perhaps the most rapidly expanding religious centre during these times, patronized by Awadh, the Rajas, Marathas, and the British alike. This was a route of great repute connecting the centre of Hindu obsequies, Gaya, and spots farther west of Banaras, particularly the confluence of the river Ganges and Jamuna at Prayag, the site of the great fair of Kumbh. (Sen, 1998: 33)

Kumkum Chatterjee also suggested that in absence of any ‘nationalistic consciousness’, the eighteenth-century travellers travelled through a ‘culturally neutral landscape’ where specific sites were important only because of their religious significance, not being a part of the ‘great transcendental historical-cultural entity called India;’ the subcontinent appeared as a landmass ‘which possessed importance primarily because it was linked together by sacred sites presided over by omnipotent gods or goddesses, or because of their mythological associations’ (Chatterjee, 1999: 199-201).

Following Sen and Chatterjee, Bijayram’s account might seem to be of limited usage to understand the contemporaneous notion of topographical landscapes. But it should also be noted that the journey through various sites became the salient theme of Bijayram’s account, in contrast to the 17th century pilgrimage accounts which are exclusively obsessed with the rites and rituals at sacred sites. Moreover, the routes and the journey became realistic in comparison with the traditional *Mangalkavya* narratives of the 16th and the 17th century. In the traditional *Mangalkavya* narratives, the Ganges was usually personified as a divine being who, pressurized by the protagonist deity, strategically planned to drown the vessels of the merchant-protagonists. Various other rivers — both mythical and empirical — then joined the Ganges to accelerate the turbulent waves of the river resulting in the desired shipwreck (Chakravarti, 2015: 223-

28, 263-65). The Gangetic and maritime itineraries towards Sri Lanka consisted only of a few realistic place names seamlessly blended with a number of mythical sea-deeps and other fabulous places. In contrast, Bijayram provided a punctiliously accurate depiction of the upstream course of the Ganges. The routes that the pilgrims followed were also fairly standardized, connecting a number of pilgrimage sites with certain detours to markets and sightseeing destinations. In addition to this, a well-developed rent and labour-market made long-distance travels less risky. Practically any service and provision could have been borrowed on the way, and the drafts issued in a regional city could be encashed in faraway places (Subrahmanyam and Bayly, 1988). However, these networks and ramifications of the long-distance travels have been reflected only selectively in the contemporaneous literature. Though *Tirthamangal* is a realistic and empirical narrative, descriptions on the landscapes and topographies are scattered throughout the text. By examining such descriptions through a thematic lens, it can be explicated how the contemporary cultural milieu shaped the representation of the Ganges in *Tirthamangal*.

The depiction of the river journey gives us glimpses of boat culture. Krishnachandra and his party began the voyage with twenty-one fleets most of which were small wooden riverboats. The main boat was a budgerow in which Krishnachandra himself travelled along with a selected group of Brahmin elites. Bijayram provided names of three other boats, i.e., *Mayurpankhi*, *Paloar* and *Toshakhan* (Sen, 1916: 34, verses 19-23) which display a mnemonic and linguistic as well as design culture. In early modern Bengal, prows of the pleasure-boats were usually designed upon an animal motif. The boat with peacock-shaped prow was called *Mayurpankhi* (Deloche and Mitra, 1991; Bhattacharya, 1995). *Paloar* was the narrow boat with sail which could have been transported

through shallow water, and *Toshakhan*, on the other hand, was probably a Bengali appendage of *Koshakhan* boats used for military purposes in contemporary South Asia (Basu, 1916: 129). Some of the terminologies associated with (the profession of) boating, such as *dar* (oars) and *darimajhi* (oarsmen), also appeared repeatedly in Bijayram's account which also display the class structure and social hierarchy. Thus, the narrative makes us understand the social and linguistic discourse associated with river-journeys.

However, in spite of the predominance of oars, the boats were driven mainly by favourable wind on its sail. On the penultimate night of their return from Prayag to Banaras, Bijayram described how the boats were stalled near the market of Mirzapur due to the lack of favourable wind:

The sailors set off the boats when ordered. But they soon reported that the waves were frightening, and the wind was unfavourable. Krishnachandra rented a palanquin (*duli*) and travelled by that, other pilgrims accompanied him as well. The oarsmen rowed the empty boats with great difficulty, and finally both parties met at a common place. The pilgrims cooked and had lunch there, and the boats finally sailed off in the evening. (Sen, 1916: 86, verses 682-89)

In contrast to the empirical description in *Tirthamangal*, the protagonist-merchants in the traditional *Mangalkavya* narratives usually travelled by pleasure-boats stereotypically named as *Madhukar* (can be translated as honey-maker, bees). The eulogistic descriptions of the boat generally glorified how the carpenter-god Vishwakarma himself crafted the vessel with cabins made of pure gold and the prows made of befitting jewels. Any empirical description on the functioning of the oars and sails, or the oarsmen was lacking. Only occasionally the helmsmen were mentioned, albeit stereotypically, praying helplessly when struck by a divinely-plotted thunderstorm, or announcing the arrival at

Sri Lanka. Bijayram, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly aware of the mechanism and functioning of the boats. Also, the long journey created an opportunity where the elite poet could observe, interact, and reflect better on the lives of the subaltern crew members, such as the oarsmen. The poet also described that the natural current of the river (*bhato-jol*) was the most favourable condition for rowing the boats, especially during the monsoon floods. He reiterated how the oarsmen sped up whenever the current was favourable (Sen, 1916: 17, 51, 52, 117, verses 216-17, 228, 230-31, 233-35, 1004).

The riverbanks were used as camping sites for short overnight stays throughout the journey. Bijayram described the unique camping experiences at different places. In the first two nights after the departure from Calcutta, the boats were anchored at the local river wharfs, and the party stayed within the boats. In large cities like Patna, Krishnachandra secured a temporary residence at the palace of a locally influential person. But, in between those cities, boats were often anchored at the riverbanks and the party camped there, either for a quick lunch and performance of everyday rituals, or an overnight stay. Sometimes, novel experiences were met with during the camping. Krishnachandra helped to cremate a dead woman in the riverbank of Madhupur (Sen, 1916: 45, verse 54-57). When the boats were anchored in Sahabaj for one night, the pilgrims spend the night frightened of the ill-reputed local thieves (Sen, 1916: 48, verses 90-94). Sometimes, boats were moored to escape unfavourable weather conditions. On the way back from Bihar to Murshidabad, high currents of the river made it possible to row the boats safely. The pilgrims then disembarked at a wild bush in the riverbank. They failed to cook their lunch due to the continuous rain and muddy terrain (Sen, 1916: 112-13, verses 943-49). Currents became even more threatening in the Ganges while the pilgrims were returning because

monsoon had already started by that time. Twice during the return journey — near Ramnagar and Jhigra, the boats were anchored within the riverside canals to escape thunderstorm. In Jhigra, the thunderstorm was so severe that most of the pilgrims got completely drenched. The next morning, fleets moved to a nearby city named Chirala and stayed there for two days until the rain stopped (Sen, 1916: 101, verses 854-56).

The pilgrims frequently observed the vast expanse of beautiful villages across the riverbanks. Usually, they could only sight the settled plain lands at both the sides of the river. But, in-between Rajmahal and Munger, when the boats travelled through the plateau of Chota Nagpur, the pilgrims could spot riverside mountains. Apart from the tribal population of the plateau, the poet also described various hilltop temples and Sufi shrines during this phase of the journey (Sen, 1916: 51, 52, verses 215, 221-29). On their way back to Calcutta, in Nabadwip, the poet also admired the sight of beautiful women bathing in the river (Sen 1916: 118, verses 1026-27).

Bijayram described the course of the Ganges with empirical accuracy. He narrated how the fleets initially moved through the northward course of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly, and then joined the westward course of the Ganges near the grain-market of Bhagawangola in Murshidabad, following which the Ganges turned northward from the Jahangira pargana in Bhagalpur (Sen, 1916: 53, verse 244-48). As noted before, he also provided empirical details on the currents of the river and functioning of the boats, and description of every city where the pilgrims disembarked. Besides the Ganges, many other rivers were described accurately in Bijayram's narrative. The pilgrims travelled through the Jalangi, the Yamuna and other tributaries of the Ganges. While travelling from Patna to Banaras via overland routes, they also crossed

two other rivers — the Shon and the Karmanasha — with rented boats (Sen, 1916: 75, 101, verses 552-54, 841-45).

However, the Ganges was also a sacred site in *Tirthamangal*. Most of the rites of *sraddha* were performed at the *ghats* of the Ganges in Banaras and at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna in Prayag.⁹ These ritual performances were recorded in a chronological sequence of realistic facts in the poem devoid of any supernatural intervention. On the other hand, a non-sacred event of thunderstorms near the city of Surajgar, was explained as a strategy that Lord Shiva devised to test Krishnachandra's devotion. Bijayram wrote:

When the boats were approaching Surajgar, the lord of Kashi contemplated a strategy. He sent the brisk wind to check Krishnachandra's (*diwanji*) devotion. 'Oh Wind my devotee! You go there and launch a gusty storm', Shiva said. At once, the wind hit with hurling sounds. The boats whirled in storm, lost moorings, and were about to be capsized. The pilgrims started to lament and pray. Some of them called the oarsmen to rescue, some prayed to Lord Shiva and his consort Goddess Durga to have mercy, some became speechless out of fear. But, Krishnachandra looked at the sky of Mogra, and began to chant Shiva's names for thousand times in meditation. Shiva's forehead rang with surprise, and he understood through his celestial knowledge that 'Krishnachandra, my devotee had remembered me'. He turned kind on Krishnachandra and stopped the storm at once. (Sen, 1916: 57-58, verses 305-18)

Therefore, in spite of describing the itinerary accurately and understanding travel as an empirical process, *Tirthamangal* was not entirely free from mythical anecdotes. In the description of his visit to the Munger Fort, Bijayram included another legend associated with the mythical king Karna. While the early-twentieth century editor of the text mentioned in the endnotes that this mythical episode is unreal, Bijayram did not have any difficulty combining myths with reality (Basu 1916: 138). Kumkum Chatterjee suggested

that the absence of any separation between myths and real episodes in *Tirthamangal* indicates “feudal forms of politico-religious affiliations” where facts and myths were hardly differentiated and political and religious authorities were co-terminus (Chatterjee, 1999: 201). But, as noted before, *Tirthamangal* was also an empirical and realistic account, strikingly different from the previous *Mangalkavya* narratives.

Such mythical anecdotes should be carefully understood in the literary-cultural context of production of the texts and the probable meaning they could have conveyed. The mythical details about Lord Shiva’s strategy in the background of the river deliberately created a framework in which Krishnachandra’s great devotion and control of emotion could have been contrasted with the helplessness of the rest of the pilgrims. Through a successful display of his great devotion and moral qualities, Krishnachandra could have claimed his superior position and potential as a leader. Moreover, mythical anecdotes were sometimes strategically deployed to situate the text in the iconic genre of the *Mangalkavya* literatures facilitating the social prestige of its patrons. In the 18th century, landed gentries of Bengal widely patronized new forms of *Mangalkavya* texts through which they articulated their family prestige. Bijayram, in his description of the storm, used the phrase — ‘the sky of Mogra’. Mogra was a mythical place near the confluence of the Ganges into the Bay of Bengal, where Dhanapati, the merchant-protagonist of *Chandimangal* suffered a shipwreck. While Bijayram punctiliously described how the storm took place near the city of Surajgar, he invoked the mythical place of Mogra simultaneously situating the text in the *Mangalkavya* tradition and glorifying his patron as its protagonist. In this context, the seamless blend of legends and empirical details in *Tirthamangal* indicates a cultural perception prevalent in the eighteenth century Bengal, where the places and itineraries

— ‘the rivers, mountains, hills, coastlands — no matter how precisely rendered, mapped or measured, are also charged with the stories of gods and heroes’ (Eck, 2012: 11).

Sites and Performances along the Rivers

This section attempts to understand the representation of the politico-commercial and sacred sites along the Ganges in *Tirthamangal* and the course of actions the pilgrims performed therein. The riverine and overland itineraries in *Tirthamangal* were constituted primarily of three sites where the pilgrims disembarked, namely, sacred *tirthas*, urban centres, and marketplaces. In the sacred sites, the pilgrims performed *sraddha* and other rituals, whereas in the urban centres and marketplaces, they purchased commodities, tasted local delicacies, and toured for sightseeing.

The pilgrims, in *Tirthamangal*, met with various groups of mobile and diasporic communities during the journey, and Krishnachandra had encounters with socially and politically influential people of different regions. While the fleets were passing through Calcutta, Krishnachandra counselled with the influential people of the city about the pilgrimage. After the party departed from Calcutta, the *diwan* of Hooghly and the *faujdar* of Rajmahal came to have audience with Krishnachandra. The *faujdar* greeted him with a tribute in cash, which the latter, being an ‘ocean of understanding’, refused with appropriate courtesy (Sen, 1916:50, verses 202-205). In the town of Murshidabad, many influential people — both Hindu and Muslim — came to greet Krishnachandra, while the Nawab of Bengal arranged for a military escort (Sen, 1916: 47, verses 169-71). Also, tribal people near the Rajmahal Hills paid tribute to Krishnachandra with a bunch of bananas (Sen, 1916: 51, verses 208-13). When the fleets arrived at Patna city, Krishnachandra sent his paymaster

to announce the arrival of the party to Shantiram Singh, the *banian* of Thomas Rumbold. Gokulchandra had prior acquaintance with Rumbold when the latter served as a member of the Chittagong Council under Verelst (Curley 2020: 99). On hearing the arrival of the party, Shantiram sent back to Krishnachandra the gift of cooking ingredients and an invitation to stay in a local mansion (Sen, 1916: 60, verses 343-48). Krishnachandra also arranged two consecutive audiences with Shitab Ray¹⁰, the Deputy Governor of Patna in charge of the revenue collection under the Company's Government of Bihar. In the first audience, Krishnachandra sent Munshi Biswanath as his representative with a clock and other gifts. Few days later, Krishnachandra himself paid a visit to Shitab Rai and conversed with him for more than two hours. Rai presented Krishnachandra with the courtly gift of a horse, a shawl and a robe of honour. Moreover, he provided the party with provision of uncooked food, and arranged a military escort up to Gaya (Sen, 1916: 61-62, verses 352-62).

Another influential man in Patna with whom Krishnachandra formed a relationship, was Madhavram. Madhavram came from the southern country and he was the *diwan* of the Raja of Tikari. He had a monopoly over the collection of taxes from the twenty-six toll stations in-between Patna and Gaya. He performed many rites of *sraddha* together with Krishnachandra, and both parties had 'shone with a wonderful brilliance' while competing. During the overland journey from Gaya to Banaras, Madhavram also arranged overnight accommodation for Krishnachandra's party at the royal palace of Tikari, and the two of them passed the night in conversation (Sen, 1916: 63, 72-73, verses 394-98, 515-20). Krishnachandra's relationship with Shantiram and Madhavram also illustrates a shared identity among the cross-regional upper-caste managerial groups in the 18th century

South Asia. They were involved in similar occupational and mercantile sectors, and claimed social prestige out of similar religious performances. The relationship between them involved both mutual co-operation and a certain level of competition.¹¹

Besides politically influential men, Krishnachandra also had meetings with various groups of brahmins in the course of his pilgrimage. However, the treatment given to different groups of brahmins was heterogenous. At a place near Calcutta named Guptipara, which was under the territorial influence of the family's *zamindari*, learned brahmins came to the budgerow to bless Krishnachandra. Seven brahmins joined the pilgrimage party here (Sen, 1916: 40-41, verses 112-23). In contrast, at Nabadwip, the centre of brahmanical learning in Nadia, brahmins 'praised and blessed' Krishnachandra from the shore, but he did not stop the fleets to converse with them (Sen, 1916: 41, verses 128-32). The differential treatment reflects upon the limits of Krishnachandra's social status and influence over the various brahmin groups.

At the sacred site of Gaya, the pilgrims extensively performed the *sraddha* rites which included *homa* oblations to the gods, ritual offering of water (*tarpana*) and food (*pinda*) to the deceased ancestors, and feasts organised for the brahmins.¹² The party performed various obligatory *sraddha* rites at Gaya for six days and then moved on to distant parts of Gaya to perform various non-obligatory rights for the next eight days, following which they came back to perform the rest of the obligatory rights at Gaya. Before departing from Gaya, Krishnachandra organized feasts for the brahmins and presented them with gifts.¹³ Various mendicants and beggars were also fed with fruits and given alms. On the day of departure, many pilgrims hailing from Maharashtra, Kurukshetra, Dhaka and other places joined Krishnachandra's party (Sen, 1916: 65-69, verses 415-80). In comparison to

Gaya, description of the *sraddha* rites in Banaras is brief in the text. The pilgrims offered ritual water (*tarpana*) to the ancestors and worshipped Lord Shiva at the confluence of the Varana river and the Ganges. The party stayed at the Bengali neighbourhood in Banaras near Asi Ghat and visited the ‘five *tirthas* beginning with Manikarnika’¹⁴ and many others temples. At each of the five sacred *tirthas*, the pilgrims offered ritual water and performed the rituals of *parvana sraddha* (Sen, 1916: 76, verses 570-76). Krishnachandra began to prepare for the establishment of a Shiva *linga* in the name of his father at Banaras. But, as this process was delayed, he took the pilgrims to Prayag for the performance of the rest of the obligatory *tristhali sraddha* rituals. In Prayag, the pilgrims performed *parvana sraddha* at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna with offering of food-balls (*pinda*) to the ancestors and gifts to the brahmins. Then they visited the five *tirthas* of Prayag and performed the *sraddha* rituals. Krishnachandra organised light repast for the brahmins of Prayag and gifted them money, sandalwood and rolls of *paan* (Sen, 1916: 80-83, verses 603-56).

Krishnachandra, as a patron, continuously negotiated with the brahmin practitioners — both local and diasporic — of the three sacred sites for the authoritative course of the ritual-performances. On the other hand, Krishnachandra had his own council of four brahmins who negotiated on his behalf. The authoritative sequences of the *sraddha* rites at the sacred sites, in this context, developed out of the collective participation of the pilgrims, patrons, and various groups of brahmins. This collective project further pointed out an effort to standardize the performative practices in the sacred sites. But in 1770, when Krishnachandra and his party visited the sacred sites, standardization was porous and incomplete. The *Antargraha* and *Panchakroshi* pilgrimages¹⁵, already popular in Banaras in 1790s, was hardly mentioned in Bijayram’s text (Desai, 2017: 38-41).

However, Prayag was also a site where many pilgrims decided to disembark and stay perpetually. The Vaishnava ascetics continued to the holy Vaishnava site of Vrindavan, while Krishnachandra and his party travelled back to Banaras for the establishment of the Shiva *linga*. The establishment of the Shiva *linga* was accompanied with elaborate feasts and distribution of gifts to brahmins and other communities. Establishing a temple at Banaras itself was a socio-political assertion, a widespread practice among the regional elites of 18th century South Asia. In 1780s, Rani Ahilyabai, the Maratha queen of Indore, built and renovated temples at both Gaya and Banaras. Rani Bhavani, a *zamindar* of Natore in eastern part of Bengal, also established a community kitchen and a temple in Banaras. Bijayram mentioned these incidents in details (Sen, 1916; 95-96, verses 771-94) along with the great achievements of Krishnachandra Roy, the 18th century *zamindar* of Nadia, and Nabakrishna Deb in Banaras situating the establishment of the Shiva *linga* by Krishnachandra in the framework already set by his regional contemporaries, such as Nabakrishna, Rani Bhavani, and Krishnachandra Roy.

The regional identity of the Bengali pilgrims is also articulated in other instances of the text. The pilgrims maintained a close relationship with the diasporic Bengali communities everywhere. They stayed in the Bengali neighbourhood (*Bangalitola*) near Asi Ghat at Banaras, and arranged special banquets for the Bengali brahmins both at Banaras and Prayag. On the other hand, the local inhabitants of the northern parts of South Asia were repeatedly stereotyped in the text. They were criticised for drinking dirty water from the wells in contrast to the riverine freshwater that the poet was habituated to drink in the deltaic Bengal (Sen, 62, verse 385); the city of Patna was disdained for the 'din and commotion of narrow allies, overflowed with excrement and piss' (Sen, 1916: 60, verse 352). Besides articulation of the regional identity, performing rituals in the sacred sites

was also intertwined with political interests. Krishnachandra secured sanction of the brahmin scholars of Prayag on the authority of his family over Bengal (Sen, 80, verses 610-12). The social status gained from the pilgrimage, along with the sanction of the brahmins, helped the Ghosal brothers to boast their socio-political authority in Bengal. On the other hand, Krishnachandra later secured for his *munshi* the position of the *faujdar* of Gaya.¹⁶ Here, in contrast to the religious merit, Krishnachandra capitalised his political authority over the sacred site of Gaya. The sacred site, after all, was a lucrative hub of finance coming from the commerce and toll taxes.

Description of markets and urban centres — even local huts and bazaars of Bengal, such as Bhagawangola, Golahat and Kaliganj — appeared repeatedly in *Tirthamangal*. Soon after the ships departed from Calcutta, food and other provisions for the journey were loaded from the market of Gokulganj. The poet could sight grocery shops and grain-markets in almost every street (Sen, 1916: 47-48, verses 176-79). A variety of items, including brass utensils and spices were available in the market of Kaliganj. Munshi Biswanath bought bay leaves (*taijas*) from this market (Sen, 1916: 48, verse 183). Bijayram was also profoundly impressed by the large market of Mirzapur in-between Banaras and Prayag. He wrote:

It was a large city by the Ganges. One gets whatever one wants here. After the lunch, Krishnachandra went for shopping to his heart's content. He bought varieties of carpet (*dulichha*, *galicha* and *sataranchi*) and yards of colourful fabrics. Even those who did not have any money bought something like mullers and grinders. (Sen, 1916: 85-86, verses 677-80)

The pilgrims were also impressed by the large buildings of Rajmahal and Patna cities. But, everywhere in the description of the cities, markets appear as the most important sites of attraction. Even downscale markets of the smaller towns,

such as Sherpur and Danapur were described eulogistically (Sen, 1916: 102, verses 859-60). Sacred sites and markets overlapped occasionally. Observing the temple at Gokulganj, the poet commented — “the goddess is in a favourable location with bazaar at her south” (Sen, 1916: 40, verse 111). Among the places the pilgrims visited were a few places of historical interest for sightseeing, such as, the fort of Munger. They also enjoyed local delicacies, such as *pera* and *chhanar manda*, the sweetmeats popular in Gaya (Sen, 1916: 67, verse 443).

Tilottama Mukherjee pointed out in her research that in the 18th century Bengal, pilgrimage was informed by a spirit of enquiry and adventure, and it ceased to be an exclusively religious activity. The 17th century pilgrimage narratives, such as the account of the Jain merchant Banarasidas only describes the rites, rituals and vows performed at the sacred sites. There is no description of the journey — the roads, rivers, markets or people (Mukherjee, 2013: 110). In contrast, the journey through a riverine course — marked with sites of gods and bazaars — constitute the main element of the narrative of *Tirthamangal*. The pilgrims in this text were aware of a larger geographical and political landscape, excited to see new places, enjoyed the respite from everyday humdrum activities, and disembarked virtually at every site worth seeing. And the river becomes the *site de passage* for all these to happen.

Conclusion

This chapter looks into the socio-cultural perception of the Ganges in *Tirthamangal*, an 18th century pilgrimage narrative text that contributes to the understanding of how regional societies looked into the trans-regional political and cultural icons and how it perceived human and topographical

landscapes across different parts of South Asia through a river journey. It should also be noted that travel narratives were hardly classified into an independent literary genre within the regional literary-cultural spaces of the 18th century South Asia. Though regional societies were featured by burgeoning growth of commerce, market, and cross-regional mobility of both goods and people, literary compositions adhered to many conventional narrative features. In this bicentric context of literary-cultural convention and socio-economic mobility, routes and sites, goods and commodities, and political authorities were described punctiliously in *Tirthamangal*, but myths and divine interventions were simultaneously interjected to explain causalities. The Ganges appeared in the text as a linkage within the wider network of sites — both sacred and non-sacred. As the prime itinerary, it connected Bengal with the pilgrimage sites of the northern part of South Asia standardizing a route with occasional detours for shopping and sightseeing. But, simultaneously, the river itself was a sacred object venerated as a Goddess throughout the cultural past of South Asia.

Notes

1. The Hindu pilgrimage of *tristhali sraddha* includes the performance of various obsequies for deceased ancestors in the sacred pilgrimage sites of Gaya, Kashi (Banaras) and Prayag (Allahabad). This pilgrimage became especially popular in the eighteenth century. See, Richard Salomon, (Ed. and trans.), *The Bridge to the Three Holy Cities: The Sāmānyapraghaṭṭaka of Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa's Tristhalisetu*, Delhi, 1985.
2. *Mangalkavyas* were composed in medieval Bengal, roughly between the 15th and the 18th centuries. These didactic poems, centred on the story of a particular deity, narrated how mortal protagonists through ages had benefitted from worshipping the cult, and suffered from denying it. The poems were widely popular, and sung to audience by troupes of rural bards —

usually over several days and nights — along with musical accompaniments, theatrical performances, painted scrolls and costumes. See Kumkum Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal*, Oxford University Press, 2009: 91, 93.

3. Messenger poems (*duta-kavya*) or message poems (*sandeshakavya*) constitute a part of the larger Sanskrit literary category of *khandakavyas*, and deal specifically with the plot of how a mortal hero sends a message to his estranged lover through a messenger. The narratives are typically divided into two definable parts. While the first one describes the travel of the messengers (inanimate objects such as winds and clouds are usually personified as a messenger) through an imaginary route, the latter one narrates the message of love, and the grief of the estranged lovers. See, Siegfried Lienhard, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. III, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984: 112-13.
4. Medieval genealogical literatures of various upper-caste Bengali clans, popularly known as *Kulaji* or *Kulagrantha*, reiterated the narrative of five legendary brahmins from northern part of the subcontinent whom a mythical king named Adisura invited to settle in Bengal. In medieval Bengal, a sub-strata among the Bengali brahmins claimed the most superior social and ritual position, by tracing their origins from this migration. This sub-strata is known as *kulin*. David Curley pointed out from the genealogical literatures of the Ghosal family that the family name was degraded from Ghosal to Pathak for several generations before the 18th century, depriving them of the *kulin* status because of the misconduct of an ancestor. In mid-18th century, Kandarpa Ghosal restored the family status through acquiring massive economic fortune. See, David L. Curley, “Styles of Mastery of a Calcutta Brahmin Family: Krishnachandra Ghosal’s Pilgrimage to Gaya, Kashi and Prayag, 1769, in Vijayram Sen’s *Tirthamangala*”, *IESHR*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2020: 78.
5. All translations from primary sources are by the author of this article, if not mentioned otherwise.
6. For detailed list of all the people who accompanied Krishnachandra, see Bijayram Sen, *Tirthamangal*, Nagendranath Basu, (Ed.), Kolkata: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1916: 34-36, 40-41, 42, verses 19-60, 118-122, 139-140.

7. Raghunath Mitra was the son of Gobindaram Mitra (d. 1776), the *naib faujdar* of British East India Company in the mid-18th century. Nabakrishna Deb, on the other hand, served as the *munshi* of East India Company during Robert Clive's governorship. As a business partner of the Ghosal family, he jointly bid with Gokulchandra for the leasehold on collecting rents from the East India Company's lands surrounding Calcutta in 1767. He also travelled to Allahabad (Prayag) with Clive for negotiating the Treaty of Allahabad (1765). In Banaras, he installed a Shiva *linga* in his own name (Ghosh, 1901: 9-11). Krishnachandra probably acquired information about the situation in Banaras and Prayag from him. He was also the leader of one of the two most important factions (*dal* in Bangla) of eighteenth-century Calcutta. Both of them were extremely rich and influential in their contemporary society. See, Nagendranath Basu, 'Endnotes', in Sen, *Tirthamangal*, pp. 131-32, endnote 31; Also see, S.N. Mukherjee, "Daladali in Calcutta in the Nineteenth Century", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1975: 66-68.
8. The merchant-protagonists in the 16th and 17th century *Mangal-kavyas*, encountered a series of gigantic predatory creatures in various sea deeps. Even while travelling through Ganges, Chand spotted Lord Shiva playing with his consort Goddess Parvati. At mid-sea, both Dhanapati and Srimanta witnessed a 'contrary epiphany' of Goddess Chandi in disguise of a young women repeatedly devouring and regurgitating an elephant. See, Kaiser Haq, *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess*, Harvard University Press, 2015:253; Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangal*, Edward M. Yazijian, (Ed. and trans.), Delhi 228-29. 267-69
9. For details on the rituals performed at Banaras by the pilgrims, see Sen, *Tirthamangal*, pp. 76-83, verses 565-656.
10. Shitab Ray was the Deputy Governor of Bihar under the East India Company's administration of Dual Governance following the Treaty of Allahabad (1765). He worked directly under Thomas Rumbold, and was celebrated for the Mughal courtly styles. See, David L. Curley, "Styles of Mastery of a Calcutta Brahmin Family: Krishnachandra Ghosal's Pilgrimage to Gaya, Kashi and Prayag, 1769, in Vijayram Sen's *Tirthamangala*", *IESHR*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2020: 81, 92, 99-100.
11. The cross regional relation among managerial groups in early modern South Asia has been pointed out by a number of historians.

See, for example, C.A. Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Portfolio Capitalist and the Political Economy of Early Modern India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 1988, pp. 401-424; Kumkum Chatterjee, "Scribal Elites in Sultanate and Mughal Bengal," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2010: 445-472.

12. All Hindu *shraddha* rites include *homa* oblations offered to the gods, ritual offerings of water (*tarpana*) to gods, ancestors and various other creatures, offerings of food-balls (*pinḍa*) to nourish the subtle bodies of the deceased ancestors, and gifts and feasts given to brahmins whose internal bodily fire is believed to transfer the food to the ancestors as the sacrificial fire transfers oblations to the gods. By accepting gifts of a patron and ingesting food, brahmin priests are believed to ingest some of the karmic sins of the ancestors as well. Transferring the sins of the ancestors by *shraddha* rites allows them to endure a shorter period of punishment in the realm of Yama, the lord of the after-world. Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. 4, Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1953: 334-36, 655, 578.
13. This part of the text introduces an interesting character named Manasaram, whom Krishnachandra met at Patna. Manasaram accompanied the party to Gaya, Banaras and Prayag, and worked as one of the councils of four brahmins who directed the authoritative performance of *sraddha*. Krishnachandra then presented him with a shawl, a piece of woollen cloth and twenty other pieces of clothes, a gold coin, a horse, a cow and a calf. Manasaram represents the professional brahmin scholars who travelled across South Asia and opted for employment under different patrons. In the eighteenth century, when the traditional courtly patronages were sharply shrinking, a brahmin priest of such expertise could have been hired from the urban cities like Patna. Sen, *Tirthamangal*, p. 82, verses 645-47.
14. The five *tirthas* referred to the shrines of Gyanvapi well, Dandapani, Mahakaleshwar, Nandikesh, and Tarakesh in the sacred city of Banaras. See, Sen, *Tirthamangal*, p. 76, verse 573.
15. Pilgrimage circuits in Banaras
16. The appointment of Munshi Biswanath as the *faujdar* of Gaya must have been approved by the Deputy Governor Shitab Ray. Also, it must have been related to the appointment of Gokulchandra for management of revenue collection of the entire territory of

Gaya a few months later. Abdul Majed Khan pointed out that Gokulchandra's appointment was also arranged by Thomas Rumbold and Shitab Ray. Abdul Majed Khan, *The Transition in Bengal, 1756–1775: A Study of Saiyid Muhammad Reza Khan*, Cambridge University Press, 1969:246.

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10

On the Sail

Boatmen and Boat Journeys in Indian River Fiction

P. Muralidhar Sharma

Introduction

The river in the pan-Indian context has often tended to be depicted as constituting a vast symbolic system incorporating a range of mythical patterns. The rivers of India, particularly because of the range of religious connotations associated with them, and celebratory accounts of their origin in Sanskrit literature, have largely been perceived as part of a “sacred” landscape. Such constructions, which rely heavily and invariably on the rich Brahminical textual traditions, have inspired a host of critical and creative reflections on the river. This view, popular among the Western intellectuals and Indian English writers, explores the myriad manifestations of what it believes to be the “river-consciousness” that is the central attribute of Indian civilization and cultural ethos. This river consciousness, which looms large in critical and creative texts as something of a core principle that flows down through history in an indiscriminate, essentialized

fashion, ignores the non-mythical nuances and socio-cultural/political/ideological ramifications of the life surrounding the river. Eck points out:

Indic civilization has long been river-conscious, and while we cannot explore all the seven of the great rivers of India today, we can amplify our sense of the patterning of river lore by looking at the Yamuna, the Narmada, the Godavari, and the Kaveri. Along with the Ganga, they are household names across India and deep resources for Hindu spirituality. (2012: 197)

There is no dearth of constructions where the river is often represented as a monolithic entity, thus acquiring an anonymity that renders it vague and unspecified. R.K. Narayan's the Sarayu is an integral aspect of Malgudi, and a befitting backdrop for much of the central actions in his short stories and novels, ranging from Chandran's romantic fantasies in *The Bachelor of Arts* to Raju's penance in *The Guide*. The river blurs as well as neatly compartmentalizes the sacred and the profane, leading to a staging of some of the major conflicts that shape Narayan's characters. What a discerning reader does not miss is the fact that the Sarayu is a quintessentially "Indian" river, just as Malgudi is a quintessentially late colonial, "Indian" town. The geographical specificity of the Sarayu is shrouded in mystery, as also the rich cultural practices that might have surrounded it. It is a mute spectator of the foregrounded action/s where the hero and heroine are the central agents. One can effortlessly multiply the number of texts that succumb to this "Anxiety of Indianness" that crucially informs the constructions of the river in Indian English texts. As Meenakshi Mukherjee would have it:

...in the English texts of India there may be a greater pull towards a homogenization of reality, an essentializing of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals

and groups in a plural community. This attenuation may be artistically valid when the narrative aspires to the condition of allegory but for the Indian writer in English there may be other unarticulated compulsions — the uncertainty about his target audience, for instance. (2000: 171-72)

Constructions in the vernacular literary traditions of India, on the other hand, treat the river as an individuated entity, both geographically and culturally. Texts in Indian languages do not embody anything like a pan-Indian cultural consciousness that has crucially informed our understanding of the singularly “Indian” river. Most of the river narratives in vernacular traditions are firmly rooted in a specific socio-cultural matrix, where the experiences of/on the river are perceived as integral to the regional cultural consciousness. Firmly positioned within their regional literary traditions, authors of these narratives strongly resist the homogenization and monolithic categorization of the river as constitutive of a mythical “Indian” experience. To that effect, vernacular narratives of the river are imbued with internally grafted, context-sensitive structures that A.K. Ramanujan famously distinguished as a crucial aspect of the plural belief systems of India (Ramanujan, 1989: 47).

Boat Culture in Literary Narrative

Boats, boatmen and boat journeys have occupied a central position in the regional cultural imaginary. In popular consciousness, boat journeys have often been associated with a range of connotations like retreat, reclusiveness, spiritual elevation, and a deeper understanding of the transitoriness of life itself. The boat journey, in contrast to the civilization it leaves behind on the banks of the river, acquires an other-worldly aura by being understood as a different order of existence. The centrality attributed to the *Kevat Prasang* from

Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* in popular *bhajans* and the more modern "Paper Boats" of Rabindranath Tagore are only two well-known examples out of an entire gamut of writings and practices that are built around the metaphor of the boat journey. In Indian river fictions, the journey on the boat and the socio-cultural practices that surround it have come to symbolize both — a more matured, philosophical understanding of life, and a movement away from it. The figure of the boatman (and woman) whose existence is inseparably intertwined with the river, shares a unique intimacy with it and offers a more personal perspective of the changing moods of the temperamental river. His way of living, and the boat journey, although symbolizing a distancing from the regularity of life, are also immersed in its inescapable mundaneness.

Recent scholarship on the boatmen community of Banaras views the *Mallahs* as ritual specialists whose participation in the rituals and religious practices is indispensable to the Hindu community (Doron 2013). Through a set of daily practices and caste-appropriate behaviour, the boatmen challenge the hegemony of Brahminism and articulate various forms of resistance to state-ordained repression. The boatmen use devices such as story-telling, reinterpretation of pan-Hindu myths like the *Kevat Prasang*, and reiteration of their significance in the "ritual economy" of Banaras to foreground their roles and assert their identities:

...the boatmen's appropriation of Hindu textual tradition and symbols of domination enables them to construct a cohesive identity for themselves and a meaningful place in the Hindu social hierarchy — one that reinforces their role as ritual specialists and furthers their social and economic interests. (Doron, 2013:144)

Although Assa Doron's impressive work on the community of boatmen from Banaras opens up immense possibilities of

a sustained critique of their representations in literature and culture, it confines itself to a study of the shaping of the boatman's identity exclusively in relation to the privileged, predominantly upper caste *Tirtha* spaces like Banaras. Studies such as this, through their omissions, entail a more immediate need to understand the boatman's identity in relation to spaces that fall outside the *Tirtha* structures.

Discourse of Boat Journeys in Indian Fiction

This chapter, through a critically nuanced reading of novels and short fictions centered on the figure of the boatman and the motif of the boat journey, attempts to examine how they become symbolic of attitudes ranging from world-weariness, resignation from life, spiritual elevation as well as notions of the struggle for existence, subservience to exploitative structures, transgression and/or sexual access/excess. In doing so, the chapter attempts to analyse short stories like "On the Boat" by P. Padmaraju and "Boatman Tarini" by Tarashanker Banerjee alongside the more well-known and celebrated novels like Rabindranath Tagore's *The Boat-Wreck* and Manik Bandopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma*. Through a close reading of selected texts from different cultures, the chapter is an attempt at reflecting upon the ways in which the boatman and the boat journey represent an autonomous ethos in themselves. This chapter treats river fiction as a significant trend in Indian literary cultures that offers interesting perspectives for our engagement with the notions of community, gender and sexuality. The chapter underlines that a discussion of the boatmen and their socio-cultural practices are imperative to any theoretical reflection on the river in the Indian context.

At the outset, it is important to notice how these narratives puncture the notion of romance associated with the riverscape.

These narratives offer anything but a mythical understanding of the river. Shorn off its mythological connotations, the river in Manik Bandopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Tarashanker Banerjee and Padmaraju draws attention to the mundaneness of the preoccupations that surround the lives of the characters and their relationship with it. Manik Bandopadhyay's boatman of the Padma, Kuber Manjhi lives in Jelepara, the fishermen's quarters in the village of Ketupur in East Bengal. In contrast to the *ghat*-spaces of *Tirtha*-sites like Banaras, which are the focus of Assa Doron's work, Jelepara is a predominantly lower-caste set-up inhabited mostly by poor boatmen. The boatmen's presence in spaces such as Jelepara enables us to examine the ideological positioning of boatmen within the social imaginary of the non-*Tirtha* sites. Subdued by endless exploitation and perennial poverty and hunger, the boatman of the Padma struggles even for a 'hand-to-mouth' existence. Jelepara is not celebrated in river-myths or glorified in the pilgrimage lore of Hinduism, it is doomed to remain anonymous:

...the shanties of the fishermen's quarter were so densely packed as to look like a congealed mass...There was no dearth of space in the world; yet, for these people, that was all the space allotted and available to them for having a roof over their heads. The entire plain was the sole preserve of the landlord. It was not possible for the fishermen's colony to overstep the limit and expand. (Bandopadhyay, 2012: 12)

Toiling endlessly on the river to make ends meet, Kuber hardly finds any respite in the domestic sphere. He has to bear the brunt of living with his "crippled" wife and later, worry about marrying off his disabled daughter Gopi. The occasional appearance of his sister-in-law Kapila is the only relief in a largely monotonous struggle. Kapila's presence in his household triggers his passion, and enables him to weave

fantasies around the playful sister-in-law. She reciprocates by frequently taunting him and leaving his desires unfulfilled:

Who could tell what was on Kapila's mind? When she was gone, the curiosity in Kuber's eyes remained obscure in the darkness. He lighted the tobacco Kapila had fetched him, and started to smoke. The agitation of his mind gradually calmed down...

Kapila was not merely adept at playing the coquette in her violet sari and well-oiled hair; she rendered Kuber service as well, the like of which Kuber had never experienced in his life. After spending the whole night on the Padma, when he came back home, he was now getting water to wash his feet with, without asking for it; he no longer had to shout for his favourite soaked rice; as soon as he finished eating, he had the tobacco at hand; his mean modest bed lay ready; and she took every opportunity to tease him by tweaking his moustache or pinching him before vanishing in a trice with a suppressed laugh: even before sleep could come, Kapila brought him dreams too. (Bandopadhyay, 2012: 63)

Kuber encounters the enigmatic Hossain Mian in frequent intervals, and these moments are full of his speculation of the life on the far-off Moynadwip that Hossain Mian has created. Men and women from Ketupur are transported all the way to the mysterious island and encouraged to set up establishments and bring progeny on the barren land. Moynadwip lingers in Kuber's imagination as a place representing both fear and promise: his hope of overcoming his penury can only be fulfilled by accepting Hossain Mian's proposal of settling on the God forsaken island. Throughout this unpredictable turn of events, what remains constant is the boatman's love-hate relationship with the river, culminating in moments of intense intimate knowledge of the shifting moods of the river:

He loved the river passionately; to him there was nothing absolutely as blissful as sailing on the river.... And yet, everything else was a superfluity, except the river. The coloured

clouds and the birds of the sky, the white kaash and green tress on the weathered bank, the throbbing life on the surface of the river — if none of these were to exist, the boatman of the Padma would still be content to love only this vast onward-flowing mass of water all his life. The sweetheart of flesh and blood loses her youth; the Padma is forever young. (Bandopadhyay, 2012: 109)

To the boatman, only the river seems to constitute something of an essence; everything else about it melts into the insubstantiality of a non-entity. His river-centric existence and inseparability with the riverscape makes possible an alternative understanding of the geography of the river — one that contests the cartographic demarcations super-imposed by maps. Kuber's understanding of the river hardly distinguishes land from water; he sees water as an extension of life on the land. He is surprised to find that the map on Hosain Mian's boat draws neat boundaries between land and water — "Kuber couldn't understand a thing; he sat gaping at the lines and labels of the map. Who knew what symbols had been used here and there to distinguish between land and water! He at least couldn't make out any difference" (Bandopadhyay, 2012: 104). Kuber's violation of the cartography of the river as part of his daily practices invites reference to Michel de Certeau's assertion in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* that the walkers' practices of appropriating the city-space embody a transgression of the geographically constructed, panoptic, administrative spatialization of the city. The boatman's movements on the Padma enable a similar contestation of the cartographic compartmentalization of the river as land and water.

The river, being an indispensable attribute of the boatman's identity, is crucial to his understanding of his sexuality. The gendered figuration of the river in contradictory terms as both a mother and a beloved further complicates the

boatman's bonding with the river. If the river in Tarashanker Bannerjee's short story "Boatman Tarini" emblemizes a sublimated sexuality, in contrast to the conjugal sexual practices of the boatman, it becomes the object of the boatman's passion in Manik Bandopadhyay, against which Kuber weaves his unfulfilled fantasies. The boatman's body has an inseparable association with the flowing river. Just as the boatman is capable of a certain intimate knowledge of the river, the river is equally capable of stirring specific reactions in the boatman's body. The journey on the boat foregrounds the complex ways in which the conjugal and non-conjugal aspects of the boatman's sexuality intertwine. The boat, in most of these narratives, becomes the agent as well as the critical site for an exploration of the boatman's sexuality. It helps him come to terms with his conjugal life and makes possible a movement away from it. What is sexual transgression on the land as a space is no more perceived as such on the flowing river. The fact of the boat journey and the experience of inhabiting an altogether different space on the boat, a space with its own notions of moral restraint and ethical framework, inspires specific involvement in forbidden sexual acts.

In Tarashanker Bannerjee's "Boatman Tarini", the boatman's seasoned responses to the eccentricities of the Mayurakshi and his skillful adaptability to the ebbs and flows of the elusive river surprise his wife Sukhi. It is both the moments of insurmountable crisis as well as overwhelming flow on the Mayurakshi that bring Tarini and Sukhi together. Their escapade into the river brings them closer to each other, leading to an intensification of the conjugal bond. The boatman's instinctive responsiveness to the changing moods of the river is passed on to his wife Sukhi, who internalizes the boatman's river-centric consciousness. She becomes an integral aspect of the mutual relationship between the

Mayurakshi and Tarini. He manages to earn a nose-ring for her as a reward for risking his life to save another from drowning. Tarini's repeated entreaties to his wife to accompany him to gaze at the river in flood is one of the central motifs in the story: they are both witness to the changing faces of the Mayurakshi — "The river is rising...Come and see the river" (Bannerjee, 2016: 27). The immense irony in the relationship between the boatman and the Mayurakshi lies in his inability to save his wife from drowning in the climactic episode. Although uncompromisingly fond of her, he fails to save Sukhi, and attempts desperately to get rid of her as he is caught in the water-currents — "He could not be beaten, he thought, not by the river he loved" (Bannerjee, 2016: 29). The figuration of the Mayurakshi, then, is a curious combination of contradictory entities. It promotes, fosters and intensifies conjugal love as well as stifles it. In Rabindranath Tagore's *The Boat-Wreck*, the boat journey on the Ganga brings Ramesh and his newly-wed wife Kamala closer. In Tagore, the river is not merely a mute witness to the gradually strengthening bond between Kamala and Ramesh; it, in fact, facilitates that bonding. It is during a boat journey and the unfortunate boat-wreck that they meet each other for the first time, mistakenly assuming each other to be the newly-wed spouse whom they have actually lost in the accident. The entire notion of mistaken identities that is enacted on the river problematizes conjugality by destabilizing the neat boundaries between the conjugal and non-conjugal. Ramesh's intense involvement with Kamala, punctuated by moments of self-doubt and guilt consciousness, in spite of the knowledge of her true identity, locates his sexual desire outside the ambit of the conjugal and the domestic, the sanctioned and the sanctified. Ramesh's self-flagellating awareness entails a repositioning of his sexual desire as forbidden. The boat journey to Kashi, which spells a moment of crisis in Ramesh's

life — the fear and apprehension of losing Hemnalini forever, for instance — brings a sense of solidarity in the couple. They, for the first time, come together in spite of the dangerous knowledge Ramesh possesses about Kamala's accidental association with him. Whereas the boat journey and the river become a medium instrumental for the consolidation of a firm conjugal bonding (even if short-lived) in Tagore and Tarashanker Bannerjee, they perform an entirely different thematic function in Manik Bandopadhyay.

In *The Boatman of the Padma*, the river offers a befitting atmosphere for an extra-marital, forbidden, and even incestuous romance and fantasization between Kuber and his sister-in-law Kapila. The stirrings of passion for Kapila intensify in Kuber as they set out on a boat journey from Ketupur to Aminbari. This journey brings in the much-awaited possibility of intimacy between the two, an intimacy that challenges convention and flouts societal norms. Mala's disability appears to be magnified in the presence of Kapila. Although Mala's deformed body is simultaneously a projection of the boatman's sexual desire and repulsion from it, it is rendered sexually defunct in the presence of her sister. In one sense, Kapila is everything that Mala is not: she is gifted with bodily perfection and can entice Kuber easily. Kuber locates the stunted physical appeal of Mala in a fuller, perfect form in Kapila. He derives momentary exhilaration and excitement from Kapila's proximity, which is more permanently manifested in their helpless escape to Moynadwip towards the end of the novel. Engulfed in mystery, Moynadwip is a created island with forced human inhabitation, one that is a manifestation of the weirdest of wishes of the enigmatic Hosain Mian. His desperate desire, to populate the island, holds a promise of being fulfilled with Kuber and Kapila travelling together on the Padma in the last episode of the novel. One can vaguely hope that

the proscribed relationship between the Manjhi and his sister-in-law would substantiate and acquire a procreative dimension so crucial to Moynadwip's future. The mysterious inexplicability that surrounds Moynadwip is itself suggestive of the immense possibilities of fostering a forbidden sexual desire. Cohabitation and procreation are of a forced kind on Hossain Mian's island. The compulsive, coercive, sexual partnership of Aminuddi and Nacchiban and the adulterous liaison of Enayet and Kabila are both permissible for Hossain Mian. During his first encounter with the mysterious island, Kuber learns of the adulterous relationship of Enayet and Kabila, and is shocked to realize that although there is public reprobation and censure, there is a covert assimilation of such aberrant relationships that fall outside conjugal respectability:

He already had a wife; soon he would be giving Hossain a present of a brand new human being — a piece of Moynadwip's future. Even so, let Enayet have another wife; let the wrong, antisocial love of the two be fulfilled; let the woman who could not become a mother in five years have a child to fill her lap; let the human population increase in Hossain's realm. (Bandopadhyay: 120-21)

Ketupur is the binary opposite of Moynadwip; it binds Kuber in familial ties, he is obliged to befriend his wife, be bogged down by the apprehensions of Gopi's disability and the near impossibility of her marriage. He is deprived by circumstances of exalting his financial as well as social status to match that of Kapila's. Life in Moynadwip, however full of danger it might be, carries with it the promise of social and economic upgradation. With it, then, comes the possibility of a sexual abandon and a carefree life with Kapila without the fear of scandal. If the Padma channelizes Kuber's fantasies, Moynadwip, situated at a point where the river meets the sea, rationalizes and legitimizes his forbidden sexual desire.

P. Padmaraju's short story "On the Boat", translated from

Telugu, thematizes the unconditional loyalty of Rangi, a concubine, to her client Paddalu, as they travel together on a boat. The narrative is mediated through the exceedingly self-conscious narrator, who is travelling with the duo on the same boat. The boat journey and the company of a concubine makes the narrator feel uneasy. He sensualizes and eroticizes Rangi and invests her body with libidinal desire:

There was a hint of bass in her voice. When she talked, you felt she was artlessly confiding to you her innermost secrets. She was not beautiful; her hair was dishevelled. And yet there was an air of dignity about her. The black blouse she was wearing gave the impression that she was not wearing any. (Padmaraju, 1959: 115)

The movement of the boat offers an occasion to the narrator to ascribe a predominantly sexual function to Rangi. She is sexually inviting, and the narrator is overcome with a fear of being seduced. Rangi's presence on the boat leads all men to potentially engage themselves in an imagined non-conjugal sexual liaison with her. Encouraged by the feeling of sexual abandon, the narrator begins reflecting on Rangi's unconventional sexuality. He sees himself as vulnerable to the dangerous sexual power of the concubine. The challenge for him is to resist the temptation of Rangi's enticing body and yet travel on the same boat. The success of the journey partly depends on his ability in warding off the temptation of Rangi's sexual charms. There is a sudden reversal of expectation as Rangi's devotion to the rogue is known to others. Her uncompromising loyalty to Paddalu even in the worst of situations, including her company in robbery, risking her own life, projects her as a morally upright woman, capable of elevating herself to the standards of housewifely respectability otherwise denied to her. Through her unflinching adherence to the principle of monogamy, she at once allows herself to be perceived as a respectably

married woman. Her ambiguous sexuality is overshadowed by her constancy to her man. It is the boat journey and the events on the boat that make this knowledge possible for the narrator, who rectifies his opinion as he realizes that Rangi is not just any public woman of questionable morals — “It was not sacrifice, not devotion, not even love. It was simply the heart of a woman, with a strange complex of feelings, tinged with love as well as with jealousy” (Padmaraju, 1959: 123).

Conclusion

The novels and short stories from vernacular literary traditions discussed above puncture the rhetoric of mythical reverence and spiritual elevation attributed to rivers, and attach rivers inextricably to a range of mundane preoccupations. In particular, they explore the complex ways in which the boatman’s understanding of his sexuality and identity formation are predicated upon the river and the many responses it generates in the boatmen as well as the passengers on the boat. The river also represents the threshold of the permissible; a set of conventions and practices that are inevitable for existence on the land are rendered dysfunctional on water. Life on the river and the journey on the boat represent an autonomous ethos that often contradict and nullify the conventions of land. Deviant and unconventional sexual behaviour, in particular, receives sanction on the boat, and sexual transgression is rationalized by the fact of the boat journey.

These narratives that are centred on rivers counter the ready referentiality attributed to the river as an agent of a pan-Indian mythical consciousness and a perennial network of religious and spiritual practices. Contesting the notion of an overarching national cultural order, the riverscape in each of the texts discussed above is deeply embedded in

its region-specificity, which destabilizes all possibilities of homogenization. *The Boatman of the Padma* and *The Boat-Wreck* offer tales surrounding life on the Padma, but each story distinguishes itself from the other by shifting the focus to a different aspect of the life on the river's banks. Manik Bandopadhyay's novel takes us to a supposedly non-descript village on the banks of the river and probes the lives of the boatmen community that depend on it for their survival. Tagore's novel has a more urban orientation about it, as the characters shift from Calcutta to Ghazipur and then to Varanasi — all on the banks of the Ganga. Just as the rivers in the narratives are not representative of an Indian civilizational ethos, the boatmen (women) are also not representative of their communities; they are singled out for the readers as unique specimens of the communities they come from. They encounter situations that provoke specific responses in them, and their manner of revolt, a recurrent strain in the narratives, is not heroic.

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11

River in the Migration Narratives of Assam

Arzuman Ara

Introduction

Migration has been a continuous process in the history of human settlement. Assam is one such region where different communities have been migrating for a number of reasons over the ages. Imperialism, colonial pecuniary practices, political exodus, and promises of new life in the green fertile riverbank areas have been the causes of migration to Assam. Citing Amalendu Guha (1977), Ahijuddin Sheikh (2013) and Ismail Hussain (2017) have pointed out that there have been four different waves of migration to Assam in the modern period — “In the first wave, there is the tea-garden labourers who migrated from the different parts of the Indian sub-continent to Assam region. In the second wave, the farming community from East Bengal came. In the third wave, the cattle-rearing Nepali people came who settled in the hills and forests; and in the fourth wave, we have people coming from Pakistan after Partition¹” (Sheikh 2013: 15). For tea-plantation, Chinese and Nepali people were brought in as

the local villagers were enjoying a self-sufficient economy and they were not interested in working for the tea-planters (Sheikh 2013:16). It is reported that the British tea companies spent around 50,000 pounds to bring the tea-laborers to work in their tea gardens in Assam. The Nepalis came to work as a part of the trusted Gorkha regiment, the Assam Rifles, etc. as well as to trade in cattle and milk-products. The *zamindari* system of Bengal had made a large number of Bengali farming communities to migrate to the Assam province which was also a part of the Bengal province from time to time (1905-1912). The great earthquakes (of 1897 etc.) also changed the natural geography and a lot of people died. Many places were abandoned that became dense forests which were given to these migrant farmers with a motive to raise revenue. Special family tickets were arranged for the migrating families for five rupees for that purpose (Hussain 2017). The cultivation works by these two communities as well as profit from the tea-gardens increased the wealth of the British to a great extent and Assam came to be seen as a land of opportunities and livelihood. However, this was not without struggle or exploitation. Natural and non-natural (man-made) disasters, both caused immense hardship for the migrant people, particularly for those who settled in the river areas and have been still suffering due to flood and erosion. The official government data on floods in Assam states that:

Assam with its vast network of rivers is prone to natural disasters like flood and erosion which has a negative impact on overall development of the state. The Brahmaputra and Barak River with more than 50 numbers of tributaries feeding them, causes (sic) the flood devastation in the monsoon period each year. The flood and erosion problem of Assam is singularly different from other states so far as extent and duration of flooding and magnitude of erosion is concerned and is probably the most acute and unique in the country. The flood prone area of the state as assessed by the Rastriya Barh Ayog (RBA) is

31.05 Lakh Hectares against the total area of state 78.523 Lakh Hectares i.e. about 39.58 % of the total land area of Assam. This is about 9.40% of total flood prone area of the country. Records show that average annual area affected by flood is 9.31 Lakh Hectares. The flood prone area of the country as a whole stands at about 10.2 % of the total area of the country, but flood prone area of Assam is 39.58 % of the area of the state. It signifies that the flood prone area of Assam is four times the national mark of the flood prone area of the country.

During post independence period, Assam faced major floods in 1954, 1962, 1972, 1977, 1984, 1988, 1998, 2002, 2004 and 2012. Almost every year three to four waves of flood ravage the flood prone areas of Assam. Average annual loss due to flood in Assam is to the tune of Rs. 200.00 Crores and particularly in 1998, the loss suffered was about Rs. 500.00 Crores and during the year 2004 it was about Rs. 771.00 Crores.

...

Bank erosion by the rivers has been a serious issue since last six decades as more than 4.27 Lakh Hectares of land was already eroded away by the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries since 1950, which is 7.40 % of area of the state. As assessed, the annual average loss of land is nearly 8000 Ha. The width of river Brahmaputra has increased up to 15.00 Km at some places due to bank erosion. (Govt. of Assam, 2022)

From this data, one can understand the kind of human crises that the riverbank people have been facing. Therefore, river and flood have become major tropes of contestation in many of the migration narratives of Assam.

Migration Narratives of Assam

There are a number of fictions from Assam that represent the migrant communities written in different languages. Rita Chawdhury's *Makam*, Chandana Goswami's *Patkair Ipare Mor Dex*, Rudrani Sharma's *Kahibunor Malita*, Leel Bahadur Chhetri's *Brahmaputroko Chheu-Chhau* are some of the narratives that have earned the appreciation of the

readers and critics. They represent the migrant Chinese, Ahom-Assamese, Miyani-Assamese, Adivasis, and the Nepali communities respectively. Memory, nostalgia and the struggles for a new settlement mark the representation of the narratives focusing on the theme of migration and the migrant people which also represent a perennial human crisis at the same time. The narratives display how the migrant communities see the 'new alien land' and its people and struggle for a space and a new life. The *girmitya*² song — *Chal Mini Asam jabo, dese boro dukh go, Asam dese, go Mini cha pata hariya* (Mini! Let's go to Assam, our native land is full of pain; the tea-leaves of Assam, O Mini, are green) — indicates symbolically the utopian greenness of a dream of life as seen by the *girmityas* and other migrants. The river has been the central trope in these narratives. Not only that the river provided a route of migration, but also the space of settlement on its banks and the *chars* to the migrants. The current chapter would study how the rivers of Assam are represented in the sub-genre of migration narratives of Assam. Three narratives are taken for the study, namely *Makaam*, *Brahmaputroko Chheu-Chhau*, and *Kahibunor Malita*.

*Makaam*³: Coloniality, Imperialism, Migration and River

The rivers in the migration narratives of Assam strongly represent the historical events of this region, particularly colonization. Modern day migration is mostly due to the British imperialism and colonization in this region. The rivers become the major route of trade and commerce as well as of migration. In *Makaam*, Robert Bruce enters Assam in 1823 through the river route signifying the colonial penetration in the pristine land. The writer gives a description of the deep forest of Assam on the river banks as:

There are deep dense forests on the both the banks of the river. There are sounds of wild fowls and *Dahuk*, and different chirping birds mixed with the ‘thak thak’ sound of the woodpecker. With that is mixed the ‘huku-huku’ sound of the monkeys. It is accompanied by the cricket’s sound. ...

There’s still a strange silence covering the dense forests on both the banks. The rowing ores splashing the water of the river Dihing making sound is spreading the restlessness of human’s ingress. Along with that, the singing of the boatmen is shattering the gravity of the ancient forest. (23)

This ingress into the *terra incognita* of Assam can be compared to Conrad’s description of entering the *Heart of Darkness* in Africa by the colonizers. It is noteworthy that many of the colonizers had described the river Brahmaputra as violent. Colonial cartographer and surveyor-general of Bengal James Rennell can be mentioned here who had mapped the Bengal delta. “Rennell described the Brahmaputra as unknown, forbidding, and turbulent” (Amrith, 2018: 34). Choudhury’s description is replete with the colonial representation of the Brahmaputra. Here the noisy river journey becomes the route to destroy the pristine peace symbolically. Contrary to the view of the colonizers, the migrants have seen Assam to be a place of life. The Chinese and the Adivasis in this novel see Assam as a land of opportunities for livelihood that makes them travel to this region though they face immense suffering after coming here.

The river is seen as an alternative to the sea route as the river is subjected to the colonial pecuniary exploration as well as invasions. This also indicates commercialization of the river/nature and objectification of nature. As China was a powerful opponent to the British in the initial days of British expansion in India, Robert Bruce plans out an alternative route to trade through Myanmar and of producing tea in Assam so that Assam tea could easily be sent to different markets through the river routes. Thus, the river being an

instrument of pecuniary interest also becomes an instrument of imperialist expansion. Choudhury in *Makaam* writes:

In order to keep a vigil upon this riverine region, the river route is being used and a gun-boat named Floatilla of the East India Company is sailed by Charles Alexander Bruce through the Brahmaputra to the extreme border place of Sadiya. He is the brother of Robert Bruce. British officer Joseph Maccas had discovered this river route in 1822. Kundilghat is the last port in this route. It took 80 days for Robert Bruce to reach Kundilghat from Kolkata via Shirajganj. Soon after reaching here, Charles started making political arrangements. (50)

Such accounts give a detail history of the process of colonization where river becomes a central trope of colonial expansion. We can also see how the region is objectified by being subjected to the colonial surveillance. The river, thus, also symbolically represents the vulnerability of this region in front of the colonial power which is ironical to the Lachit Barphukan's episode of fighting with the Mughals in the Saraighat battle where Barphukan fought in the river water on boats defeating the Mughals.

River as Marker of Territory and Sub-Nationalism

Rivers in these narratives act as cartographic signifiers and community nationalism. The rivers shape the colonial cartography in the early days of the British Raj as roads were not built. Borders and territories are named and marked according to the route of the rivers. In a mode of rewriting the history of the region, Choudhury writes how the rivers found a place in the political treaties:

Following a request of the Ahom king, the East India Company indulged in a battle with the Burmese. The Burmese lost the battle. As a result, there was a treaty between the British and the Burmese on the bank of the river Yandaboo in 1826.

According to that treaty, the right to rule Assam went to the East India Company from the hands of the Burmese. The Company kept the rule of lower Assam under it, and except Sadiya and Matak kingdom, the entire upper bank of Assam was given to Purandar Singh. Jorhat became the capital of Ahom kingdom. (70)

In the narrative, towards the later parts, the boat is replaced by the railways (which was established by Assam Bengal State Railway Company and later Eastern Bengal Railway Company). However, one would notice that the significance of the river as a route is more important than the sea which is a major route of colonial transport and migration in these narratives.

Brahmaputroko Chheu-Chhau: River in/and the Great Chain of Being

As a river-centric narrative, the novel *Brahmaputroko Chheu Chhau* focuses on the flow of the river Brahmaputra. Mention of Lohit, Lohit-Ganga, Parshuram Kunda and other rivers as well the places upon the riverbanks occur frequently in the book. The myth surrounding the river Brahmaputra and the Parshuram Kunda finds a mention in the narrative (100) which displays the spiritual connection of the people with the river Brahmaputra who consider the water as holy. We can see that the entire life cycle events of the people are integrally connected with the river — the life itself surrounds around the river. *Brahmaputroko Chheu Chhau* depicts an intertwined relationship between the different parts of the Great Chain of Being. The life of man, cattle and nature/river are tied to each other. The author specifically mentions about the river-centric life of the Nepali people as:

In the common human life in Assam, the importance of river Brahmaputra is undeniable to all. Here, the river can be

considered as the centre for the Nepali people as their livelihood activities, especially in the floating islands, in farming and in cattle-rearing farms are surrounded around the river. It is not only a curse for them, it is also a boon. This novel, since the beginning till the end, is based in and around the Brahmaputra as its centre.... As this novel makes an attempt to put forward the life of the Nepalis in real background, there are more historical elements in this novel than literary elements, which, perhaps may not be very pleasant to read; but my pleasure lies in the fact that I have tried to familiarize the life of the Nepalis as it floats around the ever-flowing river of Brahmaputra. ("Few Words of the Author," 8)

The novel starts with a realistic description of the cattle-rearing Nepali community in the river islands:

Assam, that is at the foothills of the Himalayas, with numerous big and small hills, is green with vegetation and full of natural beauty. Its rivers like the great *Mahabahu* Brahmaputra, the Disang, the Dikhou, the Janji, the Dhansiri with all their tributaries, wash the flourishing villages like playful children upon their breasts and keep flowing with their limitless desire to be submerged in some endless sea and ocean. The *Mahabahu* has not stopped destroying the villages while also nourishing them by quenching the thirst of the villages. Among such destroyed villages, one is Kochugaon which, after all the geographical measurement, is termed as a *chaponi*, instead of a village. The alluvium soil of the place is formed by the floating objects of the river's flow, where one can see 20/25 huts behind the tall weeds. They are the farms of the cattle-rearing Nepalis. (13)

Since the beginning of the narrative of *Brahmaputrako Chheu Chhau*, Assam is seen to be a land of life. Jureli and Manbeer migrate to Assam in search of a better life as they were subjected to extreme poverty in their place of origin in Nepal. However, they face immense struggle before they are finally able to settle with their own cattle farm. In the narrative of their migration from Nepal and settling along

the banks of the Brahmaputra, the novelist describes an intertwined relationship of survival between the human, cattle, grass and the riverbanks as human life depends on rearing the cattle, the cattle's life depends on the grass and the plants that grow on the riverbanks. However, the river seems to exist in its own way having a will and spirit of its own. Besides providing livelihood to the human and cattle, the river destroys that as well with flood almost every year.

The fact that the life of the settled Nepalis is dependent upon the riverbank is more prominent when the need arises to change their occupation due to the forces of time that brought more migrants and political changes. The novel shows that consecutive floods result in erosion of the riverbanks which shrink the animal's grazing areas. The search for alternative grazing areas often is faced with similar experiences of flood and erosion. Opposition from the other communities over the possession of the riverbank areas creates unrest, and the possession of the government reserve areas for grazing is strictly restricted by the government forces. Vote-centric political forces worsen the situation as no alternative grazing areas are given to the cattle rearing communities. The novel depicts a transition from the riverbank-centric rural life towards urban-centric life with education, jobs and alternative occupations. The tendency to change the occupation is seen in the thoughts of the dairy Mahajon Sri Keshav Bahadur Khulal. While contemplating upon the diminishing grazing land in the riverbank, "He started thinking that the days of living by cattle farming is over. The grazing fields are over. Now it is time to think of farming the land. I have to get land in the village as much as possible. In fact, if anybody sells land anywhere, I should buy that. I have to plan to buy land even if I have to lend money to people when they are in need" (66). The local leader, Jai Prasad Subba tries to convince the Nepali villagers to get education and move

towards the city; he himself buys a piece of land in the town and keeps his family members there (65). The main protagonist, Guman himself gets education and chooses to teach and later joins military instead of cattle-rearing. The loss of possession of the riverbank areas becomes a major topic of discussion between Guman and other Nepalis when they meet after years in the Parshuram Kunda. Mahajon regrets, "For rearing the cattle, we cannot do without the banks of the Brahmaputra and the Brahmaputra never leaves to follow us. Our village Kochugaon was so beautiful. If the Brahmaputra had not driven us so far, we would not have been displaced and forced to come so far to live with so much of difficulty" (105); Mahajon also describes how an ideal village Bogibeel was destroyed by flood. Thus, the destruction by the flood that completely erodes the riverbank villages of Kochugaon, Bogibeel etc. resulting in human displacement find a painful description in the novel.

However, despite its destructive nature, the river Brahmaputra is also the space of emotion in the novel. Guman saves Malati from drowning into the flood water in the riverbank. He and Malati develop their emotional bonding while taking walks along the riverbank. To express the strength of their bond, Malati admits to her father that, "We are bound to each other with our promise. Father, if I am not bound by the promise, then I think the best thing for me is to get a water-burial in the vast water of the Brahmaputra" (127). Ironically, it is the water of the river that supposedly becomes the last resort for Malati after her unhappy marriage with an Assamese doctor. Her disappearance creates the thoughts in Guman's mind that due to all sort of pains, "Malati could not bear the burden of the temporal body anymore and she surrenders it to the Brahmaputra" (182). On the other hand, Guman too discloses his inner feelings to the river as if the river is a living human entity. When he

travels to the city of Guwahati, the view of sunset upon the river Brahmaputra pleases him and he feels that he is near his home in the river-bank village and he feels happy to see the familiar scenery of sunset upon the river (92). When Guman is upset to see the people of Macchua Para betraying his trust, he tries to cool down in the cool breeze of the riverbank. We can see the connection between the river and Guman's inner mind depicted in a mode of objective-correlative: "His mind is streamed with the bubbles of different thought just like the different waves of the river" (173).

The flow of the river is intimately connected with the spiritual life of the Nepali people in the riverbank. People develop superstitious and spiritual beliefs and stories regarding the water spirit/river spirit. *Brahmaputrako Chheu Chhau* has a lot of description about how one becomes one with the river after death. Interestingly, many of our narratives have equated the river with the flow of life and a symbol of the eternal flow of time. Tennyson's "The Brook" is one poem that comes to the mind that says, "Men may come and men may go, but I go on forever". One might also remember the riddle-man Putta in U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* who keeps on asking riddles on the river (about the fish plays, the water runs, the stone stays and stares, 110) to Praneshacharya which becomes the turning point of the *samskar* of Praneshacharya signifying a regeneration. In *Brahmaputra ke Chheu Chhau*, the death rituals are integrally connected with the river water which becomes an ultimate dream and destination of the characters as Subba says, "I feel, this soil of Barmaputra will be the final bed for this body" (32). Similarly, the last rites of Jureli, the protagonist Juman's mother is also described as: "The flowing water of Brahmaputra took away the remains of her life in the form of the ashes" (46). Juman's father's funeral pyre is also washed with the water of Brahmaputra signifying an assimilation of

life (in the form of death) with the river. The attachment to the river is such that, Gehnath Pandit takes the flood as a test of his religious faith. When everyone leaves the village due to flood, he insists to stay back to test the power of Gayatri mantra. He is drawn with the flow of the flooded river but miraculously survives (61-62). Gehnath's survival can be seen in contrast to Malati's disappearance in the river.

Kahibunor Malita: River and Existence

Kahibunor Malita is written in the form of a bildungsroman narrative where the chief protagonist Rameez grows along the riverside and discovers the laws of both nature and life. It is a narrative depicting the struggle of existence of both Rameez and his community fighting simultaneously with both nature and hostility incurred by human beings. As a part of nature, there is a dichotomized view of the river. The flood of the river destroys human settlement just like the earthquake. Again, the river banks, catchment areas and slits provide space for new life. The society depicted here is basically an agrarian one that depends on the fertile land along the river. Life cycle of human beings is the agrarian cycle where the river, its banks and slits, forests etc. create the ecological ambience for a meaningful living.

The river in this narrative becomes a mnemonic trope as the characters in the novel look at the river as a passage of memory to their past. Basir in *Kahibunor Malita*, looks at the river as a passage to his memory — memory of his migration to the alien land of Assam. After settling in Assam also, he remembers and feels the pulse of the river in his heart. Sharma writes, “Even if he has courage, still the rowing oar’s ‘chhap chhap’ sounds in the water became one with the ‘dhup dhup’ sound in his heart” (19) when he travelled first to this region. Thus, the settlers start feeling an inner relationship

of connection with the river. This relationship is reflected in the inner feelings, which is described by Sharma as:

Devastated by flood, low-land of the riverbank and river-slits became the new settlements of these migrants. They tried hard to fill their life with the resources available there. The river is their life. The river flows always — sometimes thin, sometimes restless. The sun reflects life upon the water and sparkles that look like pieces of gold vanishing in the water. The river side is wide, so extensive! It brings a restless desire to touch the sky. One feels like floating with the river all the time ... the settling and destruction of life move with the river. Life's harmony can be destroyed in a moment by the river — the river has such anger. Such an anger that the beloved river has. It takes a destructive form and destroys the delicately built village. It destroys not just the banks and houses, it breaks the hearts. House, garden, memory, savings — all are lost and people become rootless. Still they love the river. Because they are the riverbank people. The river is close to their heart even if it is angry. It is like both of their parents; river takes, it gives as well. It will put alluvium/alluvion and make the soil rich to grow green gardens. More than that, there will be new *chars* and the *chars* will call them again to settle upon it. And they will dream again. (29)

Thus, the river plays a dual role in their life both as a livelihood giver in its “everydayness” and a catastrophic destroyer of life. The life of the migrant communities surrounds the river and the course of the river in different seasons decides the fate of the migrant people. Therefore, the representation of the river is both anthropocentric and anthropomorphic in this novel.

The river is like a living entity in these narratives — sometimes deified, occasionally demonized and mostly personified and humanized. Though the river Brahmaputra is seen to be a male river in the popular belief, in the author's reflection upon river Beki, she appears to see it as a female as Sharma writes: “The heart swells with love to see the river. It

is flowing so softly. The river is always in the innermost part of the heart. When the river flows quietly, it appears to be a woman in the house who is busy in the house chores covering the face with a veil up to her breast. Most of the women have such kind of look” (30). One can notice a romantic mystification of the river in these lines. At the same time, it is seen as someone closely familiar like a woman in the house.

For Rameez, the river is the ultimate place to disclose his innermost feelings: “The river seems to be his only companion, his heartiest friend. The river understands his pain and joy. Things that he cannot disclose to others, he tells all those to the river. He counts the waves and keeps talking to the river” (43).

Emotional oneness with the river is also depicted in the Bihu song of the small children who sing:

The river eroded our soil and our roots
 Flooded, eroded the house
 You, oh! Dear one, eroded the rods of heart
 Being our own but you do not remain our own. (185)

A critique of human greed in the anthropocene can be seen in the event where Amina’s husband goes to fish in the flooded river. “According to Amina, the river was angry with Samser’s father. He was greedy for fish. With a hope to get more fish, he kept on fishing. The fishes are also the children of the river. Catching too much of fish makes the river angry” (89). This understanding and acceptance of her husband’s death by Amina reflects the folk-belief that the river is occupied/ ruled by spirit/s and that the river is an emotional *being*.

River occupies a big chunk of the consciousness of the characters. The river is humanized and people share a familial relationship with the river. Interestingly, the rivers are gendered like human entities. Amina describes

the relationship with the river while explaining to Rameez when he asks why she is not angry with the river despite the fact that her husband was drowned in the flood, “No dear. How can one be angry with the river! Brahmaputra is everyone’s father. Can anyone be angry with one’s father? Do you get angry with your father? It is a father to everyone. Even if you are angry for a while, the anger does not stay for long. All the other rivers are mothers. Mother is a mother only. One should not be angry with mother as well” (89). Amina’s father Madhu also equally loves the river, “He loves the river; people say that the river is mad. Even if it’s mad, he loves it. Without the river, his life would have stopped somewhere. River and water — he got both these two since his birth; how can he dislike it? Sometimes dangers do come, but it has kept life alive. Those growing and dancing catkin on the bank of the river! His mind too dances wherever the catkin blooms” (58). The beauty of the river bank areas is so mesmerizing that Anirban’s friend Jasmina exclaims that “This is heaven, this is heaven” (217) when they travel to the *char* areas. Rameez is in love with the river and he tells his friend Debashis that, “I am immersed in the love of the river, so the name of the river for me is Love” (158). He explains to Debashis how he started loving the river due to his aunt, “Aunt had told — ‘If you get pain, tell the river; the river listens to everyone’. Aunt’s words were strange and mysterious. When I grew up, I understood that she had loved the river so deeply and she taught me to love the river” (158).

However, along with the emotional connection with the river, the novel also depicts the struggle for survival along the river areas due to natural calamities like flood and earthquake that change the course of the rivers. Man-made calamities are added to that as political domination over the river areas often result in feuds and fights. Displacement by the river is more psychological than physical and continuous

displacement becomes the norms of existence in the novel. Here we see, social, cultural and psychological dislocations as the flood unsettles life and people live and exist according to the laws of nature/river. Displaced people cannot be part of a decision-making process as it is done by the river as a living and destroying entity. Here, river is the only possession and hence, sharing the resources of the river creates clashes between man and man as well as man and nature. In *Kahibunor Malita*, descriptions of such clashes are elaborated in detail:

The land eroded by flood will come out or not, there is no surety of that. Madhu buys a thela (pulling conveyance for carrying goods) for his second son Zafar after taking a loan. Let him earn his expenses from there. With Zafar, he tried to get some information about the land as well. If one doesn't pay the revenue for the eroded land then it is taken over by the government. Then it becomes difficult from the revenue department to possess the land again. His brother has lost the papers as well. He somehow saved his life by coming here. Where the papers are gone, now there's no record of that. Now even if the land in the form of slit appears again, there's no surety of getting it back. Moreover, the community leaders are keeping a hawk's eye over the land like the vultures looking greedily at the carcass of dead animals. They take chances to become the owner of the land and suck the blood of the farmers. (76)

Displacement due to flood brings in another problem for the *char* dwellers, that is issues of citizenship and identity. People displaced due to erosion during flood are treated as suspicious illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (188). Many people face political discrimination as D-voters⁴ or illegal voters as they lose their documents during flood very often. The novel depicts the political turmoil and discrimination at a length which are the results of flood and displacement. Thus, the displacement by river/flood runs parallel with the political turmoil and vote-bank politics.

In this novel the river means the whole universe of the

slit-dwellers. For Abdul Hakim, “His sons stay abroad. For people like him, any place beyond the *char* areas is ‘abroad’ — be that Guwahati, Kerala, Kolkata or Dubai” (227). However, this life is a life of labour only, “Beauty, aesthetics, sense of life — as if nothing of those can be found there. It is only labour and labour. With their labour, these people fill the banks of the river with greenness. They fill them with crops. They bring the revolution of Ravi crops. With their own hands, they grow one crop better than another crop” (227). The difficulty of the place is elaborated well by Rameez when he explains the difference between the two registers related to the river catchments areas, namely, *Char* and *Chapori*:

The *char* areas are surrounded by water in all the sides, *chapori* areas are connected with the mainland of the river banks. Both are lowland areas so the quality of the soil is same in both. *Char* areas are separated from the mainland. In monsoon, one can reach there by the boats. But in the dry seasons, one has to walk a long distance to cross the river areas. There is no geographical boundary of the *char* areas. In the monsoon seasons, suddenly one river may flow through a *char* area. Then one *char* area maybe divided in the middle as well. (219-20).

The dichotomous representation of the river as a sustainer as well as destroyer of life and the attachment of the people with the river despite the calamities display that man here lives with a larger harmony with nature/universe.

Linguistic and Culinary Culture Related to Riverine Settlement

A significant linguistic culture is in practice that reflects the centrality of river in the linguistic signifying culture. Words like *ujani* and *namoni* are used to show the directions of the river and the places. People who are represented in the migration narratives of Assam are termed as *Ujani/Ujania* and *Bhatia* according to the location and flow of the river

which is focused in these narratives. Thus, the river also becomes an identity marker of the migrant people who are termed as *ujani*, *bhatia*, *chorua*, *pomua*, *no-axomiya* etc. The use of these linguistic signifiers in the narratives displays the process of political *otherization* as well as assimilation. For example, the word *no-axomiya* means “new-Assamese” with which the migrants were identified when they settled in Assam. Needless to say, linguistic nationalism has been playing an important role in the state politics of Assam and these registers related to river and river-route migration point out the same in these narratives. The river-related registers in the narratives signify the dialectal variations of the Assamese language; at the same time, giving them a space in the mainstream Assamese writing (the vernacular public space — as Sanghamitra Misra calls it, 2006: 172) can be seen as an acknowledgement and acceptance of the marginal people of the *char-chaporis* and their linguistic culture. While working on this chapter, what intrigued me was the fact that none of the writers have used the folk songs of the rivers or the *bhatiyali* songs, which are very popular in Assam, West Bengal, Meghalaya, Tripura in India and in Bangladesh.

A significant culinary culture develops for the people for being settled in the riverbanks; the celebration of food here is according to what the river provides. Consumption of fish, selling and preservation of fish in the dried and smoked form becomes a common practice. Madhu in *Kahibunor Malita* develops a habit of not eating his meals without fish; fermented rice and dried fish becomes a common diet for the people of the *chars/slits*. Rahim dies in the flooded river while catching fish which changes the course of life for Amina and her children. The culture developed through the proximity of the river finds an expression in these narratives making them cultural histories as well. The river-human relationship gives rise to a cultural structure in terms of food, language and life patterns.

Boat Culture

The description of the rivers in the migration narratives also shows the boat culture. We come across description of different types of boats as used by the British, Chinese, Bengalis and Assamese. For example, *Dingi* is used by the common people whereas *Bajra* (budgerow) is used by the officers for long journeys. One can notice the class representation through the description of the use of such boats.

River and Nature

There has been a great description of the river glorifying its beauty as well as its destructive nature when it is flooded. There are romantic descriptions of the nature surrounding the river in abundance. However, the beauty turns out to be “terrible-beauty” due to flood and earthquake that changes the course of the rivers. River is the life-line of the people. In *Kahibunor Malita*, we find people cultivating on the riverbanks while in *Brahmaputra ke Chheu Chhau*, the cattle are reared there. Flood finds a longer space in the narratives just as water and the flow of the river. The natural calamity destroys human life and animals alike. Life is always uncertain upon the riverbanks due to flood and erosion, especially during the monsoon seasons. A description is given as: “People of Kasugaon are scared to sleep. Water level has been increasing in the Brahmaputra. The erosion is bringing the river closer day by day. Although now the river is around a mile away, but people have a fear — what will happen to them after a few days. These houses, these courtyards, this beautiful village, all will be smashed into the stomach of the river” (*Brahmaputra ke Chheu Chhau*, 59). In the novel, the Assamese villagers of Boyer Ati have migrated to different places and Malati was pulled out in the last moment from the eroding soil in the bank. The situation becomes more difficult for the domestic animals like the cattle who cannot fend for

themselves and need grass and fodder. These events point out the internal migrations that constantly take place in Assam due to flood which still remains a perennial problem. River here is not presented in the light of any pastoral beauty, rather, it is depicted in terms of social realism.

There is a significant description of Partition of 1947 in the migration narratives of Assam. Many of the refugees and migrants had settled in the riverbanks called the *Char-chapori* in the local language. With the increase of them due to Partition, many settled around the riverbanks creating more crises for the people already settled there. The natural resources of the river and the places in and around had to be shared. *Brahmaputra ke Chheu Chhau* brings out these issues as a mode of telling the alternative history. It describes how the migrant Indians from Burma and Hindus from Pakistan started pouring in in the post-World War and post-Partition time which disturbed the life of the Nepalis, Bengalis and Assamese people of the *char-chapori*. At the same time, the forests, the river resources (like fish, grazing fields on the river banks, etc.) came under more threat. There have been socio-political changes and more communal clashes due to occupation of riverbank sites and demographic changes. Linguistic clashes also became a part of it as many were in favour of keeping their mother-tongue alive in the alien land.

Conclusion

The river and the riverside, thus are shown in their *raudra rupa* as well as *shanta rupa*. However, it is seen as a dystopian space — as space full of struggle and constant renewal of life. The struggle described in the narratives point to one fact of human history that migration is perennial — no place is one's own and all the places belong to all. These narratives thus call for a sustainable eco-socialism and human solidarity by displaying the plight of the people of the river.

Notes

1. It is the event of freedom of India from the British rule and Partition of India into India and Pakistan that took place in 1947.
2. The word *girmitya* is used to mean the workers who came to serve in the tea-gardens under some agreement or contract with the tea-garden owners.
3. *Makaam* is translated into English titled *Chinatown Days*.
4. D-Voter means “Doubtful Voters”.

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12

How does the River/Water Speak in the Partition Narratives of the Indian Subcontinent?

Praveen Mirdha

*To Waris Shah¹ I turn today!
Speak up from the graves midst which you lie!
In our book of love, turn the next leaf.
When one daughter of the Punjab did cry
You filled pages with songs of lamentation,
Today a hundred daughters cry
O Waris to speak to you.
O friend of the sorrowing, rise and see your Punjab
Corpses are strewn on the pasture,
Blood runs in the Chenab.
Some hand hath mixed poison in our live rivers
The rivers in turn had irrigated the land.
From the rich land have sprouted venomous weeds
flow high the red has spread
How much the curse has bled!*

...

*The poison spread to all the lines
All of the Punjab turned blue.*

...

Blood keeps falling upon the earth

*Oozing out drop by drop from graves.
The queens of love
Weep in tombs.*

...

*Waris Shah
Open your grave;
Write a new page
In the book of love.*

(Amrita Pritam², translation — Khushwant Singh)

Introduction

In the wake of freedom from the British imperial rule on August 15, 1947, came into existence the two independent nation-states, India and Pakistan, as the Indian subcontinent got divided along religious lines. The Radcliffe Commission had been appointed by the British Viceroy Lord Mountbatten to do the inglorious job of dissecting India and to demarcate the uncanny boundaries between the east and the west Punjab. Countless people on both the sides of the redrawn border were left with no alternative but to accept the cartographic action hastily designed by Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer who had never been to the region, yet he was trusted by the British government to draw the line on the map of the subcontinent without having any knowledge about the geography and culture of the land. W.H. Auden, in his poem “Partition” (1966), is critically sarcastic of the way in which Radcliffe irrationally partitioned the Indian subcontinent and unjustly decided the destiny of millions of people:

Having never set eyes on the land he was called to partition
Between two peoples fanatically at odds,

...

He got down to work, to the task of settling the fate
Of millions. The maps at his disposal were out of date
And the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect,

But there was no time to check them, no time to inspect
Contested areas...
...in seven weeks it was done, the frontiers decided,
A continent for better or worse divided.

(Auden, 1966)

The Partition along the Radcliffe line created an atmosphere of communal tensions and hostility that plagued the relationships of mutual faith and trust among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in the land of rivers where these communities had lived with communal solidarity for generations having profound empathy for each other sharing the socio-cultural spaces. Partition displaced millions of people forcing them to live in exile and scripted the history of the nation with the bloodiest violence and sentimental upheaval. Amrita Pritam's poem "Ode to Waris Shah" [used as an epigraph to this chapter], a dirge on the great tragedy of 1947, is one of the most significant personal memoirs that have addressed the horrors of the Partition of Punjab and offer a testimony to chronicle and explore the event in terms of geo-political-cultural suppositions. As we recollect the memory of Partition in relation to Amrita Pritam's composition in the midnight of August 15, 1947, it calls to mind two more important dates with respect to the division of the land of five rivers.

Partition and River/Water

March 23, 1931 and December 31, 1929 claim significance in Indian Independence Movement for their territorial connection with two rivers in undivided Punjab in the pre-Partition history of the nation. March 23 is commemorated in postcolonial history of India for the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru who were cremated on the banks of the river Sutlej in pre-Partition India at Hussainiwala, a

border village in Ferozpur district in the state of Punjab. The cremation site was parceled to the territory of one of the *newly* created nations i.e. Pakistan in 1947 after the cartographic exercise of Cyril Radcliffe. Later, the cremation spot of the martyrs was transferred to India and The National Martyrs Memorial was constructed at Hussainiwala in 1968.

On December 31, 1929 the *Purna Swaraj* or the Declaration of Independence of India was promulgated on the banks of the Ravi in pre-Partition Lahore that too was transferred to Pakistan in the remapping exercise of Radcliffe. Years later in 1947, ironically, the 'brave hearts' of Punjab took to the streets of Lahore with bombs, bullets and swords marching with loud slogans of *Allahu Akbar/Har Har Mahadev/Sat Sri Akal* which sparked off floods of blood and flames of fire giving birth to a melancholic history of the land of waters that was soaked in blood with burnt fields, reddened rivers and ruined settlements. Thus, Partition-history has to be recorded and defined in terms of migration and displacement, pain and sufferings experienced and memorialized by multitudes in the region disrupting the normal human-centered or anthropocentric approach to relationships between human subjectivity and flowing waters of the rivers.

Elegiac and dirge-like the Sutlej and the Ravi carry the burden of Partition as they flow on both the sides of the *border* paying a silent, mourning tribute to the sacrifice of the martyrs who challenged western imperialism in the Indian subcontinent. At the same time these rivers appear to lament the tragedy of Partition that continues to have a sad and depressing effect on the people living on either side of the border till date in the postcolonial India. The Sutlej or the Ravi, in Tennyson's spirit, "For men may come and men may go, /But I go on forever", flow as bereaved witnesses to the violent and volatile division of national boundaries asking

pertinent questions regarding the division of geographical territories: Can we slice apart a river? Can the invisible contours of the river lock the communal-political event in the history of the nation? Can we imprison rivers within the territoriality of Partition-politics? Can and how the waters of the rivers that flow through *two* lands be partitioned? Can emotions associated with rivers and landscape be ripped apart and disjointed from memories? Whether art, music and literature could also be divided? How does a *bridge* be constructed to stop the bifurcation of the waters of the rivers across two national territories?

This chapter would place in perspective the politics of the great event in the history of the subcontinent and discuss how the river forms part of the literary consciousness of the writers who have lived and authored Partition in their narratives and interpreted the nuances of Partition history of the river-land teeming with fertile culture and civilization. The chapter would locate rivers/bridges not merely as geographical entities but as spaces and sites that witnessed the lived experiences and realities of the migrants of Partition generations across the borders; the borders, that are always fluid and ambiguous territories, had overturned the certitude and faith of millions and tore them apart from their socio-cultural moorings at the tragic juncture of Partition turning the *panjnad* into a *river of blood*.

Along the western borderland of India run the meandering rivers that shift their courses through the divided geographical territory of Punjab whose waters are claimed by both India and Pakistan. Punjab — the land of five rivers — became a witness to as well as a receptacle of great holocaust and exodus, an agency of uncertainty, darkness, and frenzied violence in the wake of freedom from the colonial rule in 1947. Punjab etymologically means ‘the land of five waters/

rivers' stemming from *panj* meaning five and *aab* meaning water referring to the five rivers — Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej and Beas — which form the *panjnad* (five rivers) flowing into the Indus in the north-western part of the subcontinent that was divided between India and Pakistan. There existed much cultural semblance and religious tolerance among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs residing in the inter-fluvial *doabs* or tracts of land lying between two confluent rivers [between *Rechna Doab* (Chenab/Ravi), *Bari Doab* (Ravi/Beas) and *Bist Doab* (Beas/Sutlej)] in the region. People from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities have long been living on this riverine landscape where they had cultivated a civilization and culture of commonalities and cordialities shared for generations. They mixed together freely and continued to interchange cultural civilities until the politics of division threatened the civilization of communal trust and security of the 'tract' and uprooted millions of people from home and hearth. The communal disruptions on a colossal scale left them homeless and hungry, bereaved and destitute, seeking safety across the rivers which they had neither divided nor desired to be cleaved apart.

The word 'bridge' is etymologically/metaphorically consistent with the ideas of link, bond, connection, reconciliation, relationship, uniting, joining, coupling, fastening, resolving, affinity, alliance, affiliation, attachment etc. But in the incongruous semantics of Partition, it becomes ironically associated with a *junction* to separate and split, divide and widen, sever and sunder, tear and fear losing its positive connotations to unite human beings across all divisions and divergences. Thus, rivers and bridges have become metaphors of dislocation and cleavage, territorial ambiguities and abstractions in the discourse of Partition, which, having an inherent paradoxical character, simultaneously separate and unite the people living on both the sides.

River and Partition Narrative

Rivers transcend all geographical borders as they embody fluidity — both in actual as well as metaphorical sense. Rivers have acquired significance in Partition narratives not simply because water traditionally carries civilizational, sacred and spiritual implications but also for its emotional connections and interconnections with human life and experiences. Rivers have associations with the cultural memory of the people and literary texts written on the theme of Partition that identify the image of river/water with memories of love and hatred, happiness and pain, violence and bloodshed, despair and dejection. The floating memories associated with homes, which have been sacrificed or erased in the course of this divisive exercise endorse the view that Radcliffe line was a futile exercise that could *actually* divide few. The question always persists if and how literature, culture and knowledge could survive amidst “the looted, maimed and slain Punjab” (Taunsvi, 2019: 63) when *the centre did not hold things together* because Radcliffe’s cartogram became a powerful symbol to project territorial power and distorted the communal camaraderie in Lahore. The remapping of the land ripped the warp and weft of the socio-cultural fabric of communal harmony apart in the post-Partition Punjab. Tarun K. Saint’s poem *Cyril’s Map* invokes the deception contained in the divisive politics as:

Map contours move, boundaries alter.
...Map becomes mapmaker, makes cracked earth
a mirror in which new maps appear.
Myriad map images: go forth and multiply.

(Jalil, Saint and Sengupta 2017: 309).

Maps were reduced merely to the status of mental images crafted and curated by the politicians that ultimately proved

deceptive like a mirage because the practical consequences of the division of land reflected an entirely different reality. The history of Partition is not merely a history of national borders on maps that were political constructs but also a history of uncertainties of human settlements and desertions that were created and reinforced by gruesome violence and migration on this riverine landscape.

In his “Introduction” to the collection of selected short stories *Land of Rivers* (2006) Khushwant Singh’s rhetoric effectively draws attention towards the literary narratives that portray the tragedy of Partition which cruelly divided the Punjabi Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in the land of rivers: “Is there anything distinctive about writers born in the land of five rivers? I believe there is” (2006: 5). In fact, Singh was very much aware that Partition narratives inform a wide range of human emotions and human voices that have been placed beside the rivers flowing through the land that were witnesses to the sad times when a stable and vibrant riverine civilization with its inter-religious solidarity and cultural pluralism became unexpectedly scarred with the sordid religion-politics of the subcontinent. Literary representations of Partition in 1947 recount the significant geo-political changes that took place in the region articulating the migration and resettlement of those who crossed borders with heavy hearts. Most of the writers were the products of the undivided Punjab on both the sides of the rivers having firsthand experiences of witnessing the territorial separation and cataclysmic violence that took place in Punjab. It was there that they drew symbols and metaphors for their narratives and transformed the actual holocaust, geo-cultural dislocation, emotional injuries and ruptures in the lives of people living along the riverbanks into literary renderings to reconstruct and archive the history of

newly created borderlands where rivers also stood as silent witnesses to the trauma of dispossession and displacement.

Literary narratives create rivers/bridges as sites of belonging and uprooting, desertion and habitation, nostalgia and amnesia, loss and longing from the redrawn complex contours, and foreground how the geographical dissection (re)/(un)shaped the *land* and *lives* and how Partition violence dismembered all the people from different castes, class, gender, ethnicity and religion who lived/crossed porous borders across the rivers and bridges constructed over these rivers. The implications of becoming the ‘other’ were manifested in ‘the transformation of the ‘other’ from a human being to the enemy’ (Butalia, 1998: 74) within the known boundaries which no longer belonged to them overnight; remapping of borders converted people into marginalized or ‘othered’ subjects and refugees struggling with brutal communal violence, homelessness, (un)belongingness, identity-crisis, livelihood and citizenship. Scenes of uncontrolled refugee movements and violent massacres on either side of the rivers/bridges portrayed in literary writings offer a testimony to the dark history of these rivers that carried the cargoes of corpses that were *spanning* everywhere along the flowing rivers when hysterical communal “violence fanned across the land like a flame” (Swarup, 2016: 42).

Looking back at the absurdity of the whole Partition-politics in her personal chronicle of Partition *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), Urvashi Butalia asserts that, “Partitioning two lives is difficult enough. Partitioning millions is madness... drawing physical borders was no easy task....Five rivers flowed through and provided water to the state: these now would have to be divided” (1998: 80). Bapsi Sidhwa feels equally anguished at “the vision of a torn Punjab” and asks, “Will the earth bleed? And what about the sundered rivers?”

Won't their water drain into the jagged cracks?" (1989: 116). The national boundaries were demarcated along geographical lines dividing the mountains, rivers and "Indian cities like a pack of cards" (Sidhwa, 1989: 140); but, ironically, river spaces, unlike land spaces, are indivisible with their fluidity shrouded in suspicion and uncertainty because rivers tend to change the course of their flow. Rivers, though part of geographical territory, continue to remain undivided like culture, tradition, art, music, films, literature etc. yet paradoxically, rivers acquired a status of makeshift borders to inflect imperfect boundaries on the nations/states fracturing generations of displaced populations.

The new boundaries drawn in Punjab contained anomalies and indifference simultaneously towards geo-cultural realities of the lives of people in those areas. The land can be divided geographically, but a river cannot be because it is not simply a geographical reality; a whole culture of the land is embodied in the river that flows across the land. Rivers are reliable sources of water for the inhabitants of the land where they flow and the whole population draw sustenance and succor from these rivers for the survival of their civilization and culture. Rivers engage people in a whole lot of material and cultural development and thus become agencies of safe haven and secure socio-cultural-economic habitations. Urvashi Butalia, placing human beings at the centre stage of her narration, cites an episode in *The Other Side of Silence* to reveal how the river Beas flowing close to Kullu-Manali served as an agency of safe and secure haven for the victims of Partition violence. Some of the families, especially women, who suffered the violence on account of their gendered communal identity, had been left with no other option but to cross over to the north of the Beas and embark on a safe edge to preserve their 'honour' and

rehabilitate themselves in a land space that was ‘strange’ for them to be opted as a secure *home* during those times of dislocation and disintegration.

Geography and politics have been inextricably linked in/to Partition narratives. The writers have taken note of the turbulence in relation to spatial geography with a sharp political undercurrent that caused a violent upheaval in the lives of masses across the country. They have delineated how *the river of blood* dominated the cultural landscape of five rivers across Punjab leaving the wounds of Partition unhealed in each and every heart: “And a bloody river of hatred, contempt and destruction has risen and roars into all the towns and villages of the Punjab. And both parts of the Punjab have become the battlefields...which are felt upon separating one brother from another” (Taunsavi, 2019: 90). The river-banks in Punjab bears testimony to the increasing atmosphere of fear and mistrust, communal violence and inter-ethnic hostility etched in the communal minds of those who were criminalized with the bloodshed of thousands of people. It ruptured the peaceful inter-religious coexistence of millions of neighbors and friends who lived with mutual trust and love for generations. Sukrita Paul Kumar, in her poem “Cold Storage”, revisits the ‘reddened’ memory and trauma of millions of Partition victims whose hearts are the birthplaces of the bloody stream of ‘sixth river’ that has ripped apart the lives of those who have since been living with the reality of Partition:

Between the writing
and its reading
Time cracked

Dipped in Jinnah’s sweat
the pen
sliced the land of five rivers

giving birth to the sixth...
 the bloody stream
 flowing from Vaddi ma's heart;

(Jalil, Saint and Sengupta, 2017: 308)

'*Vaddi ma's heart*' represents the collective memory of the 'sixth' river that traumatized every resident of the land of five rivers in two ways. First, people living on geographically non-contiguous territories on both sides of the Ravi, the Beas, the Chenab, the Jhelum, or the Sutlej shared cultural contiguity and religious harmony; therefore, the arbitrary slicing of the land along the communal lines made it difficult for them to negotiate with cultural displacement and dispossession across riverbanks. Secondly, the brutal separation of people along the politics of communal hatred and the newly created *boundaries* could not manage to *contain* the 'bloody stream' because home spaces lost coherence in their lives and every 'heart', fraught with constant dislocation and fear of life, was emotionally fragmented. In fact, it was not their choice to remake the shattered 'home' in an alien piece of land and locate their identities in new spaces on the other sides of the rivers because for migrants in Partition narratives — "Home... is a place built through a long process of living together with others" (Bhalla, 2008: 6). Migration to the other shore had not only created material hardships for millions of people but erased the notions of right and wrong by depriving them of their basic human rights to the land and home where they were born, belonged and lived for years.

Partition narratives display dark and grim spaces of violence, dislocation, homelessness, exile, madness and gendered violence and enunciate the geo-political implications of severed connections, swelling emotions and fluid memory through the metaphor of water/river. The harrowing experiences of migrants' history, culture and

memory are re-imagined in Manohar Malgaonkar's novel *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) where the protagonist Debi refuses to accept the ignominious and desolate sights of human history. Debi regrets to see the land of the five rivers being transformed into "the land of carrion"; it intensifies his pain and agony to watch "the two great rivers of humanity flowing in opposite directions...leaving their dead and dying littering the landscape". Bapsi Sidhwa, in *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), constructs a narrative of displacement to express her dissent with the wave of communal hatred spanning on either side of the border as she depicts in her novel Sikhs "preparing to drive the Muslims out of East Punjab — to the other side of the Ravi" (130).

Khushwant Singh's novel *Train to Pakistan* (1956) recounts the nightmarish memories of Partition from Mano Majra, a village on the Indo-Pak border, half a mile away from the Sutlej River where the railway line crosses the river. The entire Sutlej-watered land enjoyed socio-cultural harmony as the Sikhs, Muslims and a lone Hindu family lived together peacefully until the summer of 1947 when the village became a hotbed of violence and criminalization on account of religious extremism, cruelty and intolerance in the wake of Partition and bears the stigma of victimhood of the innocent villagers. The Sutlej metaphorically stands as a witness to the dark, gruesome and gory Partition tragedy when a train arrives in Mano Majra crossing the bridge over the river carrying butchered bodies from the other side of the border. The 1947 monsoon was cruel for the people of the village as the Sutlej kept "rising steadily from the time the summer's heat starts melting the snows" (Singh, 1989: 93); but people have "never known the Sutlej to rise so high in so short a time" (ibid: 140) because it raised unnaturally during the 1947 monsoon when thousands of dead bodies were thrown into the river. Those "charred corpses sizzling

and smoking” (ibid: 94) floated along the flooded river suffered corporeal burden for the communally ‘othered’, objectified and dehumanized bodies — wounded, mutilated and murdered — were left to roll over the swirling river like inanimate objects and appeared as if they had been crucified on the swelled and risen surface of the Sutlej:

...they were not drowned. They were murdered.

An old peasant with a grey beard lay flat on the water. His arms were stretched out as if he had been crucified...

...There were many others coming down the river like logs hewn on the mountains and cast into streams to be carried down to the plains. A few passed through the middle of the arches and sped onward faster. Others bumped into the piers and turned over to show their wounds till the current turned them over again. Some were without limbs, some had their bellies torn open, many women’s breasts were slashed. They floated down the sunlit river, bobbing up and down. Overhead hung the kites and vultures.

(ibid.: 143-44)

The benevolent image of the river was eroded in Singh’s novel as the life-giver Sutlej betrayed the expectations of vigorous growth and well being of the residents who thrived with the flow of the river for it became inimical to them in an unforeseen manner. Water is regarded as the primordial substance from which the human life came into being, and therefore, the river occupies a significant place in human existence. The Sutlej stands separated from its traditional protective role on whose banks flourished culture and civilization but it no more remains trustworthy for people living on the riverbanks have been inextricably trapped in brutal and insecure times during the Partition era. The Sutlej was ironically transformed into a “crucifixion river” where the “friendly sluggish stream of grey had become a menacing and tumultuous spread of muddy brown” (ibid.: 140). Here, the crucified bodies, submerged in the waters, have converted

the river into a redeeming agent absolving the victims of Partition from all weal and woe. The promising river, thus, paradoxically became unpredictably associated with aberrant occurrences in those turbulent times, to emerge as an agency of brutal annihilation of the human rights of those bodies that were disgraced in death for they were even denied the right to a dignified burial.

The river, with the possibilities of life, death and rebirth, exists as an enigmatic space in Gulzar's story *Raavi Paar*. Here '*Paar*' in Hindi is to be read as 'across' as the author captures the poignant heartache that the parents endured for those children who were sacrificed at the altar of an insane desire to separate the land. When tensions mounted in the wake of the Partition, Darshan Singh unwillingly chooses to migrate across the Wagah border with his wife Shahni and their newborn twins. They board the rooftop of an overcrowded train and unfortunately one of the children succumbed to death during the frightful train-journey leaving Darshan completely disheartened and dejected:

Darshan Singh began to weep loudly. People around him realized what had happened. They tried to take the dead child away from Shahni, but she sat like a statue, and clutched the basket to her chest.

"No, he won't drink milk without his brother."

People tried to persuade her, but she refused to let go of the basket.

(Gulzar, 1997: 46)

When the train reached the Ravi, someone whispered to Darshan Singh to throw away the dead child into the river rather than carrying him to 'the other side'. As Darshan pulled 'a bundle' out of the basket and threw it into the Ravi, 'he heard the faint cry of a child' in the darkness. Realizing what he did he 'looked in terror towards his wife' who was still 'clutching the dead child to her chest' amidst the loud voices

of the people crying “*Wagah, Wagah.*” The juxtaposition between the clamorous excitement of the crowd on their safe-crossing and the depressed agony and plight that ‘unfathered’ Darshan Singh suffered at the same moment foregrounds the paradoxical character of the brutal tragedy. The Ravi here offers itself to interpret the ambiguities consistent within the role of a river which is simultaneously connected with metaphors of reparation as well as loss.

Rivers generally provide an ideal space “necessary for the making of civilizational habitat” (Bhalla, 2006: 27) but sadly the sorrow of being uprooted from one’s soil was so devastating that Partition brought out both the best and the worst in humanity: “Their civil spaces have lost coherence, their time has become fragmented, and they do not know how to retrieve their lives again and remake their homes” (ibid.: 12). In fact, Partition narratives speak more in terms of loss than reparation because most of the people like Darshan Singh became homeless, and therefore, their lives were shadowed by the despair and desolation they experienced. When the riverine civilization, sustained by a long history of shared cultural-moral values, rejected the possibility of mutual religiosity and threatened the peace of its inhabitants, their security and safety was misplaced and sacred spaces of trust were transformed into habitats of betrayal and barbarity, hatred and violence. The enormity of horror and darkness prevailing everywhere, people lost hope to recuperate their energies to recollect and reinvent their lives in future. Anticipating his unpreparedness to settle new home in a new country, Darshan felt abandoned and traumatized for leaving his home behind, and, therefore, perhaps rejected all possibility of reparation in throwing his child away into the waters of the Ravi.

The presence of the Ravi as a bloody burial space in Gulzar’s story reminds us of the destructive potential of

the rivers in human life; the Ravi can be read here as a graveyard into which Darshan Singh's newborn child was submerged. Gulzar leaves the reader with several questions: whether this perversion is an indication for salvaging the newborn from the woes of Partition which included liabilities of rehabilitation for the displaced childhood? Or does the plight and piteousness of the individual tragedy become intense through the presence of the river as a burial ground for the victims of Partition? Does the story echo the poignant voices of the whole migrant community who suffered the trajectories of dislocation on both the sides of the Ravi in those genocidal moments? Or does Gulzar remember and recount all those human lives that were either erased or disappeared during the cataclysmic crossing as he writes about the traumatic journey of an 'unfathered' migrant Darshan Singh? This perversion, in fact, brings in the river as an agency that had enforced involuntary disappearance on millions of unidentified lives during Partition.

Krishan Chander's novella *Ghaddaar* (1960), originally written in the Urdu and translated as *Traitor* by Rakshanda Jalil (2107), evokes empathy for the innocent people who were victimized in the time of gruesome violence and migration in the months of August-September 1947: "Both banks of the Ravi — this side as well as the other — were littered with heaps of corpses of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims" (Jalil, 2017: 81). The maimed and mutilated bodies of the migrants were left indistinguishable from each other in death which accounts for a dire violation of human rights of the entire displaced community.

Bajinath, the central figure of the novel, represents all the uprooted, destitute, hungry, homeless and hopeless victims who suffered frightful killings in the name of the politics of religious faith on both the sides of the Ravi. He witnesses scenes of savagery, blood and gore as he walks the field of

Dakki next to the Ravi in search of a bridge over the river where he saw thousands of innocent people scattered as slaughtered bodies; he desperately seeks “security, safety and the assurance of a new life” (Jalil, 2017: 70) across the line which he has neither drawn nor desired to be drawn. The tide of revenge and anger wrecked havoc upon groups of Hindus and Muslims waiting to cross the Ravi Bridge “that demarcated the border between India and Pakistan” (ibid: 42) in its most barbaric possibility, but Baijnath was unable to negotiate with “such excessive cruelty, such darkness... that one human being becomes thirsty for his fellow human being’s blood and is bent upon erasing every trace of his very existence” (ibid: 29).

Rivers remain alive in the cultural imaginary of human beings as an indivisible entity which brings people together; it represents a composite culture that protects, nurtures, and nourishes life. But contrary to the normative cultural beliefs where the river epitomizes an auspiciously sacred and holy space, a pilgrimage site to wash away sins into water, to Baijnath, the Ravi “faintly, appeared inauspicious’ and the ‘greenfields appeared...like aggressive battalions about to launch an attack” (ibid: 28). The fertile fields of the Ravi were transformed into “a sea of unknown, nameless, alien corpse” (ibid: 102) in the literary consciousness of the writer who feels broken and shattered at the sight of this corporal mutilation, and ironically, seems to have lost faith and certitude in the cultural theory that conceives rivers as symbols of civilization and security, holiness and redemption.

Krishan Chander reveals the dilemma of countless people like Baijnath who were uprooted by the insensitive power-politics of religious antagonism during the Partition and suffered the agony of separation from their moorings. The fratricidal tendencies governed by a strong perverted faith in distinct communal identities provoked the rhetoric of violence

that tore apart the stitches of inherited pluralistic culture of the subcontinent. Baijnath represents the collective memory of all those victims of Partition who became violently upset by forced estrangements that shifted them overnight to the torturous edges of displacement:

But how can I say that country is not my country when every speck of its dust shines in my heart like a diamond? And how can I say only this country is now my country where my experiences are still strangers to me? I can see no difference between that side of the Ravi and this. Mounds of sand line both banks of the river, and corpses are piled on both banks. The water that flows between these two banks is the same water that has been flowing on this earth since long before Hindus and Muslims came along.

(Jalil, 2017: 105-106)

Fikr Taunsvi alias Ram Lal Bhatia's journal *The Sixth River* (1948) originally published as *Chatta Darya*, dedicated to the five rivers of Punjab, is a revealing document on Partition that laments the loss of art and culture of the city of Lahore amidst widespread bloodlust and madness that injured the land in the wake of freedom/Partition. Taunsvi's memoir narrates his own eye-witness account of the barbaric acts of communal slaughters and bloodshed that defeated and defaced the fertile culture and civilization of the land of rivers. His writing bears testimony to the scars of the cartographic changes that sundered the lives of people on whom exile was thrust by the politics of exclusionary religiosity. In his "Author's Note" he locates the city of Lahore situated on the banks of the Ravi as a tragically savage site sadly disfigured by the flow of the *sixth river* of blood when communal riots broke out with the announcement of the Partition:

The Sixth River is the story of that barbaric time when human civilization was headed towards...the bloodshed of millions of people.

Foreign rule had split the lively and verdant Punjab into two religious parts. Ten million people — having left their homes, fields, orchards, ploughshares, and loves and hates — were dragging their feet, wandering, fighting...

...man had reached that pinnacle of culture where he stood with his vain head held high at his own barbarity and bestiality. It is then that I wrote this story of blood and fire. The story revolves around those three months when — with the Partition of India, associated communal riots, and the transfer of population — the greatest mistakes in history were committed one by one...Lahore which was the centre of high culture and civilization, which, with a single imperial blow, had been turned into the river of blood and fire. This river had soon spread to all corners of the beautiful and prosperous Punjab.

(Taunsvi, 2019: 36)

Taunsvi's "sixth river" is the metaphorical river of blood and fire that was created by Radcliffe's divisive map-line in the middle of Punjab which is termed as "the gigantic snake of Sir Cyril Radcliffe's that was let loose to bisect his beloved Punjab" (Taunsvi, 2019: 18). Taunsvi blames Radcliffe for announcing his award in the form of a "thousands-of-miles-long snake" (ibid: 69) which divided the art and culture, music and dance of Bengal; it had also disfigured and destroyed the ploughs and farming of Punjab throwing the green fields, irrigated by five rivers, out of shape as cannons, guns, and firearms converted the life-nourishing rivers into nothing but rivers of blood and the fertile land into a mound of battered bodies. Wherever a snake appears, it arouses an archetypal image of danger and death, a primordial feeling of fear. Taunsvi's invocation of the demonized and terrifying snake imagery within the contextual framework of the dark history of Partition is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's imagination, the river Congo emerges as "a mighty big river...on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest

curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land” (1995: 8). The bisecting snake-like line dividing the Indian subcontinent invokes the stereotypical image of the river in its ruthless and destructive form as it occurs in archetypes and popular myths. The divisive map-line across the country, linked with the snake, places in perspective the dangerous and dehumanized face of the *sixth river* of blood which instinctually devoured the peace and harmony of the land.

Taunsvi feels tremendous pain, anguish and irritation at this divisive mayhem and mourns the trauma of the forced migration and undesired violence. How the river is culturally devalued as a material commodity in the writer’s imagination that could be bought and sold for money is explicit as he asks the unknown perpetrators of Partition violence in his sharp satiric vein: “Will you buy Lahore? Buy the waves of the Ravi? Eight annas per wave” (2019: 52). Taunsvi records that “Lahore’s streets were now overrun with a flood. A flood of blood, a storm of fire” (Taunsvi, 2019: 48). His anguish is apparent against the wave of communal passion and bloodshed that flowed through Punjab and turned the translucent glow of the waters of the Jhelum, the Sutlej, the Ravi, the Chenab and the Beas red. Fikr laments the poisoning of the secular minds into frenzied communal rioters and asks who the beneficiaries of these violent *ripples* were? In fact, the rivers remained silent observers to the *betrayal* that was suffered by the harmonious cultural atmosphere of Lahore; the art, literature, philosophy, knowledge and science of the city were being devoured by the *sixth river* in the wave of Partition. It was sad that the schools and colleges — the *voices* of learning and knowledge — were ironically transformed into refugee camps and shelter-homes resounded with the *cries* of the victims of violence. In a state of anxiety and anguish his heart bleeds against this imperial design:

...just as two swords may not be sheathed together in one case, two cultures will not live together in one country... divide our rivers, divide our mountains, divide our Punjab. Split our Ravi and Beas, sunder our Heer, divide our Sohni — else we will chop each other to death and annihilation. And we won't let ourselves be independent—never!

(Taunsvi, 2019: 45)

Taunsvi recalls the great Punjabi love stories of Heer-Ranjha and Sohni-Mahiwal, to show how the 'Poetics of Romance' is deeply associated with the rivers of Punjab transcending all the temporal-spatial boundaries; these tales of romance hummed across the region symbolically represent all the love stories of partitioned Punjab. The wide Chenab, flowing between the villages of Sohni and Mahiwal separating the lovers, emerges in Partition narratives as an agency of submerged sorrow of all those lovers who suffered separation across the rivers because the waves of love and happiness were annihilated by the waves of communal venom and hatred. Swimming across the river of communalism was an impossible dream in the era of communal emotions. The politics of communal faith and fidelity dominated over the Romantics of emotions of millions of Sohnis and Mahiwals, Heers and Ranjhas whose dreams were drowned and *panjnad* became a graveyard of the innocent lovers whose romance was flushed into the waters of partitioned Punjab: "A river of love had spurted out. How terrible was this love? It did not have the balance of dance and melody" (Taunsvi, 2019: 78) but pangs of loss and separation.

Fahim Azmi reflects upon the tragic plight of the romance of rivers in Punjab through an evocative image of Sohni's floating clay pot with the help of which she desired to swim across Chenab to meet her lover but she was drowned and unfortunately the river became her grave; the same river or its sister-rivers became burial pits for innumerable innocent

bodies that were flooded and flushed into the waters of *Punjab* during the Partition violence, thus, uniting Sohni-Mahiwal's tragic love-story with all the unfortunate lovers who suffered pangs of separation during Partition:

There was a cry from the moon,
And the eyes of the wind shed tears,
The grave was built in the river,
On the pitcher made of raw clay.

(“In Memory of My Birthplace” in Geeti Sen 1997: 124)

How and why the Partition ripped apart the lively, colourful, vibrant and composite culture of Punjab remains unanswered. Fikr sentimentally recollects a line from a Punjabi folk song ‘*Meri chunni ler ki taraan*’ (‘my *chunni* is like a wave’), and recapture the vibrant colours and pulsating music of Punjabi culture that people have universally shared and enjoyed for generations. He questions the territorial abstractions that tore apart the composite culture of the land of rivers:

Does only western Punjab have the right over its resonance?
Does only the heart of eastern Punjab reverberate with it?
These two pieces? Will we divide this echo into two as well?
...The Punjab itself is a *chunni*—beautiful, colourful,
undulating. But it has now been shredded. Could we join the
scraps ever again? And this *chunni*? Will it wave in the land
of the five rivers to the same melody and the tune?

(Taunsvi, 2019: 156-57)

Perhaps the answer rests with Asha and Lana who observe fasting on the occasion of *Karva Chauth* for their Muslim lovers wearing the *chunnis* from Punjab in Radhika Swarup's novel *Where the River Parts* (2016) and seek to revive and recreate life around the cultural traditions from their roots in their exile in the West. The cultural anthropology of the rivers/bridges suggests that national border marks are not

simply geographical demarcations or political constructs; rivers and bridges contain socio-cultural forms and practices that reside not ‘outside’ but ‘within’ the bodies and boundaries of a nation-state. Cultural territoriality always denies the *othering* of geographical, political and historical boundaries to consolidate and reconstitute the marginalized, ruptured, shattered, mutilated subjectivities fulfilling the human longing to live peacefully and *belonging* body and soul to the land they always loved as home shaping their dreams and desires. The *chunni* with its vibrating wavy colours assumes the status of a cultural production that is, in the words of Kajal Tehri and Asmat Jahan, “significant in its refraction of cultural attitudes [and] ...creates a moment of empathetic identification with the humanity of the ‘other’” (Jalil, Saint and Sengupta 2017: 47).

A river/bridge also becomes a space and site that escapes the monolithic narratives of politics that Partition irrationally imposed on the land and the community that lived harmoniously before the *mapping* of the subcontinent. To reimburse the loss with a sense of altruism and humanity and partially to right the wrongs of Partition, Khushwant Singh reconstructs such altruistic moments in his fictional landscape when people like Jugga could subvert the communal impulse planned in the shape of retaliatory violence in *Mano Majra*. Jugga’s sacrifice in times of extreme communal polarization and inhuman ethical breakdown symbolizes universal rejection of the retributive justice for he allowed safe-crossing to the train carrying the Muslims across the Sutlej Bridge to the other side. Similarly, Kajal Tehri and Asmat Jahan, in their article “History, Memory, Genre” recall how Darshan Singh in *I Too Have Seen Lahore* goes to Jalandhar from Lahore across the border to relocate the lost ancestral spaces and how Darshan’s memories and “his reminiscences create space for the humanity and kindness of the Muslim mob

which let unarmed Sikhs cross over to the other side of the Ravi, unharmed” (Jalil, Saint and Sengupta, 2017: 47). Such *kinesics* of kindness emerges as a signifier to reckon river as a cultural precedent in identifying the collective empathy of the communities towards each other.

Baijnath, in *Traitor*, also refuses to be swayed by the wave of vengeance and decides to set up his *new home*, embracing a Muslim orphan birthed by the Partition violence. Baijnath, in tune with the tradition of empathy evinced by Jugga and Darshan Singh, surpasses the permanent lines drawn between the two nations. Krishan Chander chooses a Baijnath who rather than succumbing to the bewilderment of communal anger and hatred and be a *traitor* emerges a *loyalist* to brotherhood, love and humanism. Chander’s Baijnath envisions that:

...a bright light glimmered around me — from that bank of the river to this. I lifted the child high in my arms and kissed him on both cheeks and his forehead. Then, hoisting him on my shoulders, I walked towards that valley of hope where the sun never sets.

(Jalil, 2017: 107)

Radhika Swarup’s 2016 novel *Where the River Parts* is written along the memories of her father’s family who have been affected by the trauma of Partition and had to leave Lyallpur in West Punjab to make a new life in Delhi. The novel places the tale of love and friendship of a Hindu girl Asha in love with her Muslim neighbour Firoze who was a brother of her best friend Nargis, beside the recorded history of the river land. Living on the cusp of brutal Partition with all impossibilities of survival of her friendship and romance along ‘the gentle lull of the Ravi’ (Swarup, 2016: 36), Asha becomes a wanderer from one *centre* to the next without being aware that transgressing boundaries on earth cannot

change her desolation born out of the historical partitioning of *her* land. Mounting communal tensions and escalating violence nipped in bud the love story of Asha and Firoze who desired to marry across the religious lines in undivided India overcoming their deep-seated religious-cultural divergences. While crossing to the other side of the Ravi to India, Asha's family became a victim of vehement violence and hysteria in the Suhanpur massacre. Rescued by a Muslim family, Asha finds herself separated from her homeland, her family and Firoze, her lover. Asha along with Rupa and Sanam in the fictional space of *Where the River Parts* belong to the bracket of orphans who were created by Partition yet they negotiate with their refuge and attempt to reinvent their lives by making a home again in exile.

Partition lands Asha in Delhi replacing the romantic *Dham dharak*, *dham* of the western bank of the fast-flowing Ravi with its thundering and thrill with the sorrowful rhythms of 'monsoon-swollen Yamuna' (Swarup, 2016: 149) that symbolizes her yearning for an eternal loss, her unfulfilled dream to unite with Firoze in a lifelong relationship. The Firoze whom Asha loved 'died in the Partition' (ibid.: 268) and with this ended the thunder and thrill and thump of the flow of the Ravi beating in consonance with the heart-throb of the lovers.

Straddling for a half a century between 'Suhanpur as home' and 'Pakistan as hostile state' (Swarup, 2016: 184) Asha meets Firoze again in New York and faces one more choice, i.e. to fulfill the wish of Hussain and Lana (grandchildren of Nargis and Asha respectively) to be married across the religious lines choosing their happiness. Once again, the passionate memories of the thrush and beat, the *Dham dharak*, *dham* of the Ravi overcomes the trauma resulting from all scars, aches and pains that were felt when 'the country was cleaved in two' (Swarup, 2016: 216). The

resonance of romance, once felt in the eternal, musical flow of the Ravi, surmounts all insurmountable spatial and temporal distances and undeniably follows Asha and Firoze in New York. Their days of yore on the banks of the Ravi once again become alive transcending all borders as they revisit all those sites on the riverbank where they had once been happier. Life across continents takes yet another nostalgic turn as the author, sentimentalizing the youthful romantic memories of their shared past, at once transports the reader to “their last, fateful meeting on the banks of the Ravi” (Swarup, 2016: 225) when Firoze had “promised her flowers...promised her estates in the hills...promised to still the thunder of the Ravi” (ibid: 254). Once Suhanpur, now Mianbad; but the surging memories of the love, loss and longing felt in ‘the rush of the river’ conquer histories, continents and generations to unite Hussain and Lana in New York despite “the obstacles to the match — his being Pakistani, her being Indian... [yet] how little they were concerned by nuclear tests, by power strikes, by the building of dams over the subcontinent’s rivers” (ibid: 220). Swarup records in her novel how difficult it has always been for human beings to rebuild homes, re-establish trust, reconstruct the idea of composite culture and re-imagine borderless society where religious faith or dogma is not required to love and live. To exorcise the ruins of Partition, the future generations of victims need to carve a healing space to find anchor in the river of love that can pulsate their incoherent life into coherence again.

Cutting across the schism that grew between India and Pakistan over the years, Gitanjali Shree’s recent Hindi novel *Ret Samadhi* (2018) articulated the trauma of violence and displacement during the Partition of the subcontinent. She dwells upon the literary legacy of Amrita Pritam, Intizar Husain, Sadat Hassan Manto, Krishna Sobti and other literary artists who share an equal space in the cultural heritage of

the nations on both the sides of the Radcliffe line. The novel narrates the Partition woes of Chandraprabha Devi — an eighty-year-old ‘dadi’, haunted by her sense of past along the banks of the Ravi — who lives with an acute pain in her heart for the lost home; the author’s idea is to give visibility to the *border* that her protagonist has to cross all through her life. She acknowledges the necessity to counter the after-effects of the wounds of history fraught with the trauma of the *loss* suffered by generations across the fences if the possibilities of cross-cultural dialogues remain frozen.

Rivers have entered the Partition narratives as participants in a vision of harmonious culture and civilization that existed in the pre-Partition India; but paradoxically the same rivers soon became eyewitnesses to the collapse of the religious goodwill of those habitats for the profane politics that fractured the fabric of inter-religious friendships of generations living on those riverbanks. The fictional testimonies address the injustices and wounds suffered by millions of innocent and vulnerable people on both the sides of the border showing how rivers became witnesses to the scenario of exile, forced migration, dislocation and displacement and bear the burden of extreme forms of collective violence in the polarized religious climate. Territorial bifurcation of rivers remains partial because a flowing river — like memories or human *existence* — transcends all borders, and hence cannot be divided just as that the artists and the literary writers cannot be divided. Memories of lost homes, like rivers, flow on both the sides of the *border* and serve as important signposts for reclaiming the sense of hope and redemption from the history of violence because the ‘other’ people across the boundary are equally part of ‘us’. The imaginative writings stress the compelling need to *forget* and *forgive* and find sanctuaries for the sufferers of communalized politics and heal their wounds.

Conclusion

Finally, the post-Partition generations feel an urge to revise and reconsider the blood-drenched decision with an ideal to create an enclave of confluent cultures for the displaced and dispossessed and keep them connected with the land of their birth which is always 'home' for them. Today, the same rivers flow on both the sides of the border but with some sense of alienation. Cultural memories linked with the Ravi/Sutlej/Beas/Jhelum/Chenab call for the subversion of the narrative of man-made rivers of blood flowing out of communal anger, suspicion, fear, hatred and violence with a message of mutual understanding, acceptance and negotiation. To preserve the essential human virtues of empathy, tolerance and love that reside with the rhetoric of *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*, we must find anchorage in the tradition of composite culture, pluralistic in character, so that the *waters* of the rivers can freely float and flow across the borders and candidly say no to all the *tears*, because the waters of the rivers cannot be separated like those of the waters of the Ganga and Jamuna rivers in the heartland of India.

Notes

1. Waris Shah (1706-1798) was a Punjabi Sufi poet who penned the tragic story of *Heer Ranjha* based on the traditional Punjabi folk tale of Heer and Ranjha.
2. Amrita Pritam's poem '*Ode to Waris Shah*', composed in the dark of the night during her train journey from Dehradun to Delhi in 1947 as a 28-year-old refugee from Lahore is the first dirge/elegy on Partition by a poet from Punjab. Khushwant Singh was the first to translate it into English and he said that those few lines have immortalized her in India and Pakistan. The poem addressed to Waris Shah invoked the tragedy and horror of the 1947 Partition and urged people to endorse the virtues of empathy when all hope seemed lost and culturally undo the cartographic blunder.

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13

Cosmopolitics

Reading the Riverine Stories in BVS Rama Rao's *Godavari Kathalu*

Kotti Sree Ramesh & D. Jyothirmai

Introduction

“That politics has always been a cosmopolitics ...”, says Bruno Latour (2011:3), the French philosopher, sociologist and anthropologist. It has always been about landscapes, animal husbandry, forests, rivers, lakes, irrigation, about building cities, the management of disease, in brief, it is about cosmic and material forces. The ‘cosmos’ for Latour is a renewed meaning from Greek, which means disposition, an arrangement, a way to compose agencies, with the idea of beauty and ornament in addition to that of materiality. Citing the Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers’ *Cosmopolitics* (2010), Latour elaborates the concept *politics of the Cosmos*, which foregrounds the connection between the cosmic and material forces. Interestingly, in Greek language, ‘Cosmos’ means ‘order’, and ‘world’, as the ancient Greeks believed the world as an ordered whole — perfectly harmonious. Indian civilization, perhaps, until the colonial rupture,

has negotiated this harmonious connection with nature in complex tradition and ritual. So for Latour, “To speak of cosmopolitics is to say that the world has to be composed. To be composed and not to be unveiled, possessed, mastered, or abandoned for some other world, a world of outer space, of Pandora’s planet, or a world of beyond, a spiritual realm” (2011: 3).

The Godavari Cosmopolitics

Subaltern communities and peasants, in the state of Andhra Pradesh who live along the Godavari river and the adjoining forests, have ‘composed’ their lives in harmony with the river for ages and negotiated this connection through rituals, myths and stories. The life of these communities has evolved over the centuries in accordance with the knowledge of the river, their interaction with its non-human life, and their own dependence on it. The interface between the river and the community in ecological sustenance and ritualistic functions is marked with reverence. Each of these subaltern communities has entered into a “natural contract” with the river by interacting with it in their own way. For example, the fishermen communities migrate to different locations along the river, based on the different seasons and migration/movement of fish. In the lean times they leave the river to “breathe” and rejuvenate.

The river Godavari (like all rivers) has for ages nurtured numerous languages, cultures and bio-diversities along its course crystallizing the idea of a river as a life principle. The river and its moods, tides and whirlpools, the fish and the fishermen community, boats and the boatmen, priests and their rituals, gods, goddesses and the sacrifices, town and forest dwellers, and their riverine linguistic registers form a “terrain of consciousness” — a unique “life-place”. The

living presence of the river, and the biodiversity fertilized along its flow were combined to create a distinctive culture and world view for eons. Every aspect of the life of these riverine people is informed by the overwhelming feminine presence of the river as '*Godaramma*' (Mother Godavari). The different communities of people own the river, or rather the river 'owns' them, giving a different meaning to each of their lives. This owning is not possession and ownership that leads to power and conflict over its resources as we are now witnessing between many states and communities. None of the riverine people in the stories complain about the river's annual flood, rather they call it *pongu* (overflow). The word *pongu* in Telugu language is drawn from *palapongu* meaning the ritual overflow of boiling milk during auspicious occasions. The word in both the contexts points to celebration. For the people of this bio-region, as R. Uma Maheswari says, the annual flood of the river is not 'flood,' but she (river) 'comes' — *Godavari Occhindi* (2015:221). Depending upon the volume of floods, people in this region call it *chinna Godavari* or *pedda Godavari* (Small Godavari or Bigger Godavari). Accordingly, the communities adjust their lives to its "moods" as a child adjusts to its mother's moods. But this 'composition' is however disturbed, when the 'outsider', for whom the river is only a source of wealth, interferes for extraction of the resources for profit. This 'outsider' is one who doesn't value or recognize the 'composition' and the 'natural contract' between the riverine human-inhabitants and the river. The harmonious *cosmopolitics* of the riverine people, deeply embedded in the living river, is simply meaningless to the greedy 'outsider'. The outsider's view comes from the modern commerce driven ethics which has objectified and commodified the river. The 'dammed' river becomes less of a river and more of storage disrupting the harmonious lives of the flow-dependent communities.

Since colonization, the peasant and the subaltern communities in the Godavari region near Rajahmendravaram, especially those living in the hill tracts along the river, have witnessed the interference of the outsiders, such as — British revenue and police officers, Indian troops, civilian subordinates, traders, and contractors. This led to numerous violent rebellions in the region as late as 1920s. Modernity, mediated by colonization and later globalization and technology, is always in conflict with the natural hill and riverine life. Indeed, the most obvious interference of the foreign capital interests began during the colonial times (1850) with the building of an anicut on the river Godavari near Dowlaiswaram, by the colonial engineer, Sir Arthur Cotton¹. Though it was constructed to revive the depleting revenues of the East India Company, it was actually touted to *control* the frequent floods. History has proved that it has failed to achieve its objective. However, the anicut and its vast network of canals, has immensely transformed the region of Godavari delta as it ushered in the monoculture cultivation of paddy and a powerful lobby of the delta farmers. Not surprisingly, the farming community of Godavari region adore Sir Arthur Cotton as Bhagiratha. The present political capitalist language of exploiting, restraining and utilising the river and its resources is a re-invoking of the colonial discourse. The river as a life principle, which is indicated by its dynamic relationship with the riverine community, its culture and history, is now lost to state control and the powerful lobby of the rich farmers of the Godavari delta. Like the flow of the river, the narrative of the river and its people is also now in the control of the state.

Godavari Kathalu: Narrativising River

This chapter is a study of select short stories from *Godavari Kathalu*² (1989) by BVS Rama Rao. Rama Rao, a retired

engineer of the Andhra Pradesh State Irrigation department, worked at Dowlaiswaram barrage and observed the river in all its moods. The first edition of this book was published in 1989, three years after the unprecedented Godavari flood in August 1986. It is, however, surprising that BVS Rama Rao, being an irrigation engineer, does not use the state discourse of control and commodification of the river. Interestingly, almost all the protagonists of the stories are drawn from the riverine communities, especially from the subaltern classes, for whom the river is a living entity; they are the farm workers, sand diggers, poor Vedic scholars and priests, tribal communities, committed village doctors, beggar and mendicants, people of the fishermen communities, etc. Conversely, the antagonists are the ruling classes, such as, the forest officers, irrigation engineers, police personnel, tax officials, sand contractors, boat owners and the upper-class landlords of the villages.

All the stories are set in the 1980s, and are located on either bank of the Godavari, in and around Rajamahendravaram which is the nucleus of Godavari bio-region. Rajamahendravaram is a historical city ruled by the Eastern Chalukyas and is considered to be the cultural capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh. It is in this city that Nannaya, a court poet of the Chalukyan King Raja Raja Narendra, undertook the translation of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* into Telugu in the 11th century. The city and the nearby villages are also popular for the Vedic scholarship similar to Varanasi. The city was also the hub of social reforms in the late 19th century when Veerasalingam Pantulu, (1848-1919) inspired by the Brahma Samaj movement, fought social ills of widowhood, child marriage and dowry system. He is called the father of Telugu cultural renaissance and modernity. His *Rajasekhara Charitamu* (1880), set on the banks of the river Godavari, is the first novel in Telugu language that captures the distinct cultural and linguistic dialect of the region.

Numerous stories (*Ma Diguva Godari Kathalu*, *Ma Pasalapudi Kathalu* (2008) by film director and writer Vamshi, *Gautami Gathalu* by Indraganti Hanumchastri, *Godari Kathalu* by Datla Devadhanam Raju etc.) and novels and films like *Andala Ramudu* (1973), *Godavari* (2006) etc. are set on it making it a “life-place” — a *bio-region*. Robert L Thayer Jr. describes a *bio-region* as “literally and etymologically a ‘life-place’ — a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and non-human living communities. Bio-regions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similarity of plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms . . . and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region” (2003: 3). The anthology under study and the narratives mentioned above, stand testimony to the unique bond between the people, the terrain, the river and the feeling of oneness with all its human and non-human life forms making it the Godavari bio-region.

The first story of the anthology “Gundello Godari” (In the heart, Flows Godavari) is made into a bilingual film *Gundello Godari* in Telugu and *Maranthen Mannithen*³ in Tamil in 2013. The film combines the plots of the two most popular stories of the anthology — “Gundello Godari” and “Pushkarala Revulo Pullatlu” (Pullamma’s Sour Dosas in Pushkar Ghat). The story is about a young working-class couple of the village Bangarampeta situated on the banks of the river Godavari. It so happened that they are getting married on a day when the river Godavari is “in flood”⁴. The sights, sounds and music of this lower-class Hindu wedding capture the typical linguistic registers used in the bio-region. The names of the young couple are not mentioned anywhere in the story. They are just common pronouns ‘Aadi’ and ‘Vadu’ — she and he. As the marriage takes off, the village head’s son, Sri Sri Sri

Abbayigaru, appears and makes the priest announce his gift of a slender gold chain to the bride. Followed by this, is the announcement of a gold ring by Jangam Pydamma, a young sinuous woman, to the bridegroom.

While the hurriedly wedded couple is in a state of surprise over the unexpected gifts, a police jeep appears, announcing the breach of flood walls near Polavaram. The new couple stands amazed, and before they realize, flood water engulfs the pandal while the wedding guests run helter-skelter. The next few pages describe their struggle to safety. They even get separated giving anxious moments to each other. Finally, they find a huge hay stack floating on the flood waters on which they find a safe place. The unusual flood carries away the floating hay stack on which the couple rests. The anxiety and the wounds inflicted while swimming to safety make the couple sympathize with each other and bring them closer. They even consummate their marriage on the hay stack.

Now that they are man and wife, they enquire from each other regarding the circumstances of getting gold as gifts. As death is imminent in the deluge, they wish to confess the motives behind the gifts. As a worker participant in strike for higher wages in the paper mill of Rajahmundry, he was forced to hide from police in Jangam Pydamma's house. She agrees to hide him if he cohabits with her. But when she comes to know of his marriage, she wanted to give a gift so that he won't forget her. It is now the turn of the bride to explain why the village elder's son gifted her a gold chain. When her mother tried to borrow money for her marriage from the village head's son, he seeks sexual favors from the bride. One night, the mother takes her to the village head's son's boat. When the bridegroom assumes that she might have obliged, she tells him that she not only rejected his advances but even threw the amount on his face. But later Sri Sri Sri Abbayagaru⁵ relents and gives the amount in

installments. He, however, tells her that he will give such a gift that she will not forget him after her marriage. It is clear that Jangam Pydamma and Abbayaigaru intend to disturb the marital life of the couple with their expensive gifts. Here the flood of the river becomes the space of their narrative that recalls their past.

Narrating their past, the couple is rid of their guilt-consciousness. This is in tune with river as the atoner of the guilt/sins. As their hearts are now light, they neither mind to die in the flood nor do they curse the river for the catastrophe. As the hay stack disintegrates, they jump on to a floating tree, which brings them within an arm's reach to Rajamahendravaram Railway Bridge. They climb the bridge grabbing the iron girders and save their lives. The gold ring and chain, gifted to spoil their marital life, are promptly removed and thrown into the flooded Godavari. Thus, the swollen river brings them together as man and wife swallowing their past. This is symbolic in the sense that, for the protagonists who believe in the river as a living presence, and the cosmic force it stands for, the trappings of the exploitative capitalist ethics have no place. In throwing away the costly gifts, the couple reaffirms their faith in the power of the river as the cosmic mother.

“Yesaru, Athyeseru,” the title of the second story in the anthology denotes the two stages of cooking rice. Vardhanamma is an old Brahmin widow who lives with her grandson and his young wife on the banks of the Godavari. It is her habit for decades to employ the neighborhood labourers to collect the floating logs from the river during the season of flood for making firewood. It is also her habit to feed the labourers with hot rice with mango or tamarind pickle before they venture into the river. Satthigadu⁶, is one of those laborers who prefers her hot rice with the mango pickle⁷ more than the wages she paid. Her grandson and his

newly married 'outsider' wife resent the old woman's habit of feeding the labourers.

One early morning Satthigadu wakes up the old lady and asks her to cook hot rice for him before he goes to collect the logs in the flood. The feeble old woman, who has been fasting for a couple of days, gathers her energy to cook hot rice. She watches with gratification when the young labourer eats ravenously her hot rice with mango pickle. Later, the old woman comes to know from the concubine of Satthigadu that he was ill and in bed for a week and he was weak to swim in the flooding river. Vardhanamma is worried over this fact and goes out searching for him on the river banks. As she couldn't find him in the river, she returns home exhausted with a sense of guilt for allowing the sick man to venture into the flooding waters. But suddenly, Satthigadu comes out of the blue dragging a huge log. She feels relieved to see him through her moist eyes. She quickly goes into the back yard to cook his favourite hot rice while Satthigadu starts cutting a few logs for her firewood. But when he comes to eat the hot rice, he finds Vardhanamma lying down besides the sacred Tulsi. The rice being cooked completes its two stages — Yesaru to Attyesaru (Yesaru — rice boiled in water and drained, Attyesaru — rice boiled in water and allowed to cook softly without draining the boiled water) and even starts burning. Satthigadu and her grandson discover that she has breathed her last. As the grandson has hardly any money with him, it is Satthigadu's log that fetches the amount for her cremation. It is the river and Satthigadu that provide for the last rites of Vardhanamma, who like many orthodox Brahmin women of the region had great reverence for the river and lived on with what the river provided with satisfaction. Her grandson and his wife, who find fault with her, are oblivious about the intertwined lives of people with the river that people like Vardhanamma and Satthigadu share. The narrative, thus,

represents two kinds of emotional bonding with the river Godavari.

The next story in the anthology is “Thippalu” which in Telegu means “Sand Dunes” in the riverine context and in general usage, it also means difficulties. Every year after the floods, huge mounds of sand are deposited on the river bank near Rajamahendravaram — the extraction of which makes it a flourishing business. Sand contractors and mining officers organize the extraction and sale of this valuable commodity. In the recent times in Andhra Pradesh, there are lot many controversies and scams around sand mining in the riverine areas. The sand-diggers community, who trace their origin to King Sagara of the Suryavamsha dynasty mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, are traditionally employed as labourers in sand mining. These sand-diggers are called “Uppara” and they are listed as a backward community in Andhra Pradesh. They live in large communities on the banks of the river. The narrative employs the linguistic registers associated with river and sand digging, and the specific community linguistic registers of the Uppara community of the Godavari region:

E uppari pare kadu — metta para, potti para, gubbemedhichinna, sarenanasellilalirakottu, dadinaruku, kudapoduvu, sammatam, pudchatamsesisuppettamanandi, sallenghi!

(Godavari Kathalu, 1989: 52)

The sand contractor’s brother-in-law, who is employed to oversee and control the digging and transportation activities, gets attracted to a young sand-digger, Mahalakshmi, and he daydreams of seducing her. The community-elder cautions the contractor’s brother-in-law that Mahalakshmi is sometimes possessed by Sattema Talli, Nukamma Talli and Posemma Talli — all the local riverine goddesses. So, whenever she is possessed, a piglet is sacrificed to pacify the fury of the goddess/es. The bouts of possession by the goddesses are

similar to the seasonal ‘flooding,’ or to put it in riverine community’s parlance, are the ‘coming’ of the Godavari/Goddess. The living presence of the Goddess finds a voice through such possession of Mahalakshmi for the community. Hence, her bouts of possession are feared and revered just as the ‘flood’ in the river is feared, revered, and accepted. The contractor’s brother-in-law gives a deaf ear and asks the girl’s brother to send her to his camp office while he encourages him to drink liquor in the local arrack shop.

The next morning Mahalakshmi’s brother wakes up from the hangover and assumes that the contractor’s brother-in-law must have seduced her last night. He finds her swimming in the river happily while her bag is full with currency. He takes up a crow bar to kill her but a commotion stops him when he hears that the contractor’s brother-in-law was buried neck deep in the sand. Mahalakshmi had not only rejected his advances but buried him to the neck in the sand. For the contractor’s brother-in-law, Mahalakshmi is only an object of lust that can be lured and seduced just as the river’s sand is available for extraction and exploitation. But the punishment to the contractor’s brother-in-law is a warning to all those who try to tamper with nature, especially the rivers and the river-spirits.

“Idam Brahman” (This is Brahman) is the fourth story in the anthology which is about an old Vedic scholar Subbavadhanulu. Rajamahendravaram and its surrounding villages, especially on the banks of Godavari, are popular for Vedic scholars and schools. Subbhadhanulu, a well-known Vedic scholar, with the title of Mahamahopodyaya, aspires for giving Vedic education to his grandchildren even though his own sons had ‘English’ education against his wishes. His wife, Somidevamma with her worldly practical knowledge reminds him that the days of the Brahmanical scholarship are over and it is only due to English education of their sons that

today they are living comfortably. But the pious old man is anxious about the future of the Vedic rituals and priesthood if everybody goes for English education and jobs. His anxiety doesn't arise to revive the Brahminical hegemony in society but due to his earnest faith in the age-old tradition.

One morning, the deputy Tahshildar (Revenue officer) of the town, who happened to be the classmate of Subbhavadhanulu's son, comes to invite him to oversee the rituals associated with the immersion of the funeral ashes. It seems that in a recent major air plane accident, a top leader of the country had died along with the other passengers. So, the Government of India has decided to immerse the ashes of the dead in all the major rivers of the country. A minister of the state government will be arriving with the urn of ashes to be immersed in the Godavari. Even before Subbhavadhanulu accepts the invitation, as he is not adept at performing such rituals, the deputy revenue officer convinces him in a hurry that the collector is intent on his presence. The hasty revenue officer gives a deaf ear to Subbhavadhanulu who cautions him to be careful with the urns, rituals, and the names of the dead men. For him, any mismatch of the name and the ashes is a matter of sacrilege. Subbhavadhanulu also tells the revenue officer to call a priest in the next street who is specialized at such rituals as he will only oversee the whole process.

On the day of immersion, the illustrious scholar is taken to the Rajahmahendravaram Railway station and made to wait from morning till afternoon. The deputy revenue officer is too busy making arrangements for the retinue to care for the old scholar who rushed here even without eating his breakfast after the previous day's fasting. Moreover, to keep the audience engaged, he requests the old scholar to recite the Vedic *mantras*. Subbhavadhanulu is already exhausted by the time the minister arrives and the procession starts. Knowing his orthodox credentials, no one dares to offer

him even water to drink. The procession finally reaches the river *ghat*⁸. A decorated punt is kept waiting off the *ghat*. Subbhavadhanulu and the minister and other city elders were taken to the punt in an overcrowded steamer. The repeated requests of Subbhavadhanulu to arrange the special priest is not headed. So, to complete the rituals, he was forced to recite a few *mantras* after which the ashes were immersed without following the set of procedure. And before the old man could realize, the minister and his retinue board the steamer leaving the poor old scholar on the punt. The steamer never returns and the old man is at the mercy of the punt operator, who has to cook and finish his lunch after the tiring day before he drops the old man back to the *ghat*. Subbhavadhanulu reaches home, totally exhausted. His grandson who has been reading the school books hides them under the mat and starts reciting the Vedic stanzas out of respect for his old grandfather. Observing it, Subbhavadhanulu gives a strange look which surprises even his wife.

The hollow pretence of the ritual is a mockery of the sacredness that people like Subbhavadhanulu give to the solemn rites. The immersion of the dead men's ashes in the river is a holy ritual and has meaning for Subbhavadhanulu unlike the Minister and his retinue. The sacredness attached to the immersion of the ashes in the river comes from reverence to the age-old tradition which is based on the significance of the elements and passing of the dead from this to the other world. For men like him, the river and the rituals are still flowing; they have not yet become 'empty cisterns and exhausted wells' as in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Conclusion

Every story in the anthology reflects the conflict between the riverine community's deep attachment with the river as a larger life system and the hypocritical 'modern' culture

that tampers the river for commercializing its resources. The scant respect for the river as a cosmic life force gives way to the idea of possession and ownership that enables it to be extracted and exploited. The harmonious cosmopolitics of the riverine community, based on the deep earthly wisdom gained by the information and experience over the ages, is gradually replaced by the commerce driven extractive and industrialized dispensation which hinders dangerously and alters the environmental/ecological function of the river. So, we can conclude with the words of Bruno Latour (2011: 3) that the world has to be composed instead of having to be modernized.

Notes

1. Sir Arthur Cotton, in defence of the Godavari anicut proposal said: "It must always be remembered... that the extent of our territorial possessions, and the complete establishment of our paramount power, have given us the command of all the water of India, so that although the rains fail, and water may disappear in one part of the empire, we can always supply it from another; as the rains never fail everywhere... so that our control of the water enables us to equalise the supply in different parts of India." (See Major General Sir Arthur Cotton, "Irrigation and Navigation in Connection with the Finances of India", address delivered to the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce, May 7, 1863, 9th reprint from Calcutta Englishmen, London, 1863: 30)
2. *Kathalu* in Telugu means stories.
3. The devastating deluge came after three years of distressing drought. And in its wake, the waters of the Godavari, glorified as placid and benign in Telugu literature, unleashed unprecedented havoc on their way to the Bay of Bengal. The death toll of 250-odd people in the freak floods that crippled Andhra Pradesh. Last fortnight does not convey the full nature of the catastrophe. *India Today*, September 15, 1986.
4. The film was directed by Kumar Nagendra and produced by the protagonist actress Manchu Lakshmi. The film was released

in 2013 and was a box office hit in Telugu. Manchu Lakshmi got the Filmfare Award for the best supporting actress. Ilyaraja composed music for the film which was shot entirely near Rajamahendravaram.

5. The author is referring to the unprecedented 1986 Godavari floods.
6. Adding 'Garu' at the end of a name in Telugu language is a mark of respect. Similarly adding 'Gadu' at the end of the name is to belittle the individual.
7. Andhra Pradesh is popular for mango pickles. The Godavari bio-region is known for its varieties of mangoes and pickles.
8. *Ghat* is a built structure, usually a series of steps leading to a body of water such as bathing or cremation place on the banks of a river or pond.

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*The authors have translated the texts into English wherever required in this chapter.

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14

River of Plaintive Voices

Darker Sides of Modernity in Na. D'Souza's *Dweepa: The Island*

Chand Basha M

Introduction

The image of the river is effectively used in the literary imagination of writers across cultures, space, and time. There seems to be no literary trajectory that is devoid of water. The presence of water plays a dual role in both metaphysical and real physical patterns of civilisation and culture. Many writers have penned down novels that bespeak the enigmatic affiliation between water and land that unveils a culture haunted by the sense of survival and belongingness. The river appears in the literary narratives mainly as a dominant metaphor for survival. The river flows through the structure of lives of communities and cultures of memories across the globe which often form the core of many narratives. For example, flaneurs such as Claudio Magris chose the banks of the river Danube to trace down the contours of civilization and knowledge of philosophers, poets, and thinkers in his phenomenal work *Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the*

Source to the Black Sea (2008). Rivers are alternative maps of memory and cultural referents. In Indian literary cultures, the poetic phrase “Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb” is used to express the formation of syncretic cultures in the north-Indian region. The phrase unveils the significance of shared cultures of India. The confluence of rivers is also the amalgamation of a sense of togetherness and new hopes in times of cultural crisis created by the rhetoric of growing religious jingoism.

River in Kannada Literature

The literary cultures of Kannada attribute multiple meanings to rivers flowing in the geography of Karnataka. In the public memory and folklore of the state, various cultural locations and pilgrim places share a mythical and syncretic cultural affiliation with rivers. The use of the river is not a new practice in the literary imagination of writers from Karnataka. It is probably not easy to study the trajectory of a literature that allows rivers to add life to stories. But one of the earliest available texts to us can be referred to here. The river existed in the literary imagination of Kannada in the pre-colonial period. The 9th century poet Sri Vijaya uses the rivers to describe or measure the territory of the land of Kannada speakers in his monumental work *Kavirajamarga*¹ (“royal path for poets”) thus:

Twixt sacred river twain it lies —
From famed Godavari
To where the pilgrim rests his eyes
Only holy Kaveri... (1921: 29)

While the Godavari river is attributed to a high rank of popularity, the Cauvery or Kavery river is elevated to the status of holiness. The latter is a source of spiritual liberation for a pilgrim. A wide variety of meanings are realized while mapping the trajectory of literature that grapples with

the water or river. The state poet G.S. Shivarudrappa uses the river as a metaphor for the soul's desire and unending journey towards attaining spiritual freedom and escape from the material world. The crux of the meaning can be better understood in the below-mentioned stanza of his poem or a *bhavageethe* (song of emotion) entitled "To Unseen Sea":

Desire of river (stream)
 To unseen sea mind is desiring
 Can I see one day?
 Can I join sea one day?²

The poet's soul is represented here by an unnamed river longing to reach the destiny i.e. an unknown sea/ocean through enigmatic passages of time and space. The unknown sea is a site of spiritual liberation. Simultaneously, in his poem "Shalmala nanna Shalmala" (Shalmala, my Shalamala), Chandrashekhar Patil, one of the poets of the Bandaya movement³, personifies the river Shalmala as a beloved companion and a site of togetherness which second the full-fledged wisdom of an individual. He seems to display the river as his 'dear woman'. The river is attributed with an enigmatic personification. The birth and passages of the flow of a river are beyond the reach of his understanding. He seems to highlight difficulties in tracing the roots of a river and understanding a woman's inner *self*. The poet asserts that he cannot imagine his life without the presence of Shalmala. The natural rivers that appear in the Kannada literature are thus ascribed with multiple symbolic meanings and signification. The river is a source of hope and identity, a metaphor to beloved, and it is a site of cultural belongingness.

River in *Dweepa*

The story-teller Na D'Souza pens down a fascinating novella entitled *Island (Dweepa)*, 1978, (trans. 2013). The plot of

the story unfolds myriad associations developed between Sharavathi, one of the principal rivers flowing in the Malenadu territories of the region, and the natives living in the Western Ghats range. The novelist is also popularly known as a “Submersion Writer”. He leverages his twenty-five years of work experience in the areas connected with the Sharavathi hydroelectric project and has strengthened his narratives. He has contributed a substantial body of tales to the Kannada literature, and his stories are also known as “Submersion literature”.

His narratives give a mimetic representation of problems created by the construction of the Linganamakki dam; hence, the story becomes the voice of the displaced families that went through the indescribable angst of losing and leaving their living places due to the construction of the dam. In the process, the writer also meticulously narrativizes multiple situations on how the roaring progress of modernity seconds the erasure of cultures and lives of people living in the Sharavathi basin. The image of the dam becomes a means of modernity. The novella provides counter-narratives on modernity, and the plight of a family stranded on the island exposes the darker sides of modernity. The novella stands as a testimonial narrative of the plight of families which become subject of submersion. His other works, such as *Mulugade (Submersion, 1984)* and *Oddu (Dam/Barricade, 1990)*, significantly unveil numerous affiliations between the natives and nature and the geo-cultural distortion due to the modern technological progress like the construction of dams in the region. The narrative fabric of *Dweepa: the Island* throws light on a strange ambiguity of not leaving the age-old traditions and land behind. The lower strata of the social order succumbed to the cultural strangeness created by urban sensibilities.

The image of the river has been given multiple meanings

here in comprehending the cultural and social bonding between humans and nature. The existing scholarship on the text seems to apply the idea of displacement to families who lived in the river basin. It can be opined that the existence of the river Sharavathi is also violently distorted. The novella relies on metaphorical referents that disclose the various threats to the sundry identities of the river. Owing to the construction of the hydro-electric project and the Linganamakki dam across the Sharavathi river, the character of the river is transformed; a life-supporting river is made to aggressively destroy the lives of the natives who had worshipped it since time immemorial.

In the process of changing the role of the river, not only people but also various rituals and cultural practices vanish in the bustling sound of the rising river. For instance, *nema* is a ritual of foretelling the future of various events. Duggajja, the father of the male protagonist Ganapayya, inherited the tradition of *nema* from his ancestor. While performing the rituals, he is given respect and enough money for his livelihood by the village's landlords. The ritual of *nema* becomes a source of livelihood and cultural identity of the family. His family and sensibilities are deeply rooted in the soil and roots of the island. Contrastingly, the urban space does not need any practice of *nema*; hence Duggajja cannot perform the *nema* in the urban space. His son Ganapayya was neither rich nor poor. He used two acres of wetland to grow areca and three acres of agricultural land to grow rice. Nevertheless, the sudden shift of home from the Hosamane village, which becomes an island later, to a nearby town invokes a sense of cultural crisis and homelessness in the psyche of the father and the son.

Most of the indigenous groups live together in small villages or hamlets. They have their cultural ethos attached to them. For instance, the protagonist's family has only a small

hut, and it earns them compensation of twenty-five thousand rupees only. In Ganappayya's own words, the compensation can give them food and shelter but cannot compensate for the people's love and respect. The performance of the ritual of *nema* has given them a divine status that connects them with the island. They would be one among the hundreds of families struggling to make a living in the urban space.

Walter Benjamin pointed out that "there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1969) which is very apt in our understanding of the narrative. The process of modernization, globalization, and privatization in the last few decades has accelerated India's transformation as a nation-state. India's primary social institutions, such as the village, joint family system, and caste relations etc. are significantly changed. Globalisation has accelerated industrialisation and rapid economic growth, but it has also deepened social fractures. One of the central ideas of globalization seems to be the evolution of a global culture. The advocates of globalization believe in the standardization of lifestyles. Nevertheless, it leads to the universalization, fragmentation, and hence to erasure of identities as well. The storyteller fears the alienation of the indigenous forms of culture and knowledge due to the developmental works oriented towards the Western progress model. Since 1990, India has entered into a new development path aided by the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, Western countries, MoUs with different countries. The governments of the nation have sought external help in modernisation projects. The sense that India lives in her villages seems to have slowly got vanished. Modern ways of marketing has taken agriculture out of the hands of farmers and placed it in the hands of the corporates. This resulted in the displacement of farmers to the main-lands in search

of new jobs and livelihoods. As the President of "Sharavati Ulisi Horata Sanghatane" ("Struggle Committee to Save Sharavati"), he gave a press statement to the Kannada daily *Udayavani*, saying that the dams have been an instrument of modernising and industrialising India based on the western models. However, they have created displacement and loss to a great extent to the inhabitants of the river banks⁴ (D'Souza, 2019). Jawaharlal Nehru called dams the temples of modern India. But the novelist says that dams also cause the displacement of families. The government's alternative land and monetary compensation do not substitute the sense of belongingness towards their native places and the "security of neighbourliness" (*The Island* 27). Many tribal communities refused to go to urban locations.

Further, in his interview with G.N. Mohan, D'Souza recounts how cattle, that were also displaced and taken to far off places like Shivamogga by their owners, returned to one of the villages which are now submerged in the backwaters of the Sharavathi river (Kanniradaru Na. D'Souza, 2020). While these projects generate benefits for the few relatively better-off sections of the population, they also, at the same time, marginalize the lower sections of society. Various research works claim that the Sardar Sarovar dam has displaced more than two lakhs of people, and about half of them are indigenous or Adivasis⁵. The Linganamakki dam has also created similar problems for the people who lived in these villages in the basins.

Concerning the rituals like *nema*, the novella highlights how such development projects deprive the tribal people of their traditional means of sustainable livelihood and put them into the abyss of dismay. The story unfolds how new projects assist in the growth of cities in the distance and disturb the river's existence and its divine association with

natives living on the bank of the river. One fine morning, Ganapayya wakes up to witness the alarming changes in the natural flow of the river thus:

Even as he walked down the slope, he saw the Sharavathi. Previously, before the dam had risen, the rivers flow was towards the waterfall. Now he could see the water but not the flow. With the dam blocking its way, it had stopped right there beside their hillock, restless and choppy. Just the previous week he could see the tips of the boulders on the hill. The water had not risen much. But now it had widened the riverbed on the side away from the hill and was threatening to overflow the bank. The Sharavathi lay like a pregnant woman, full and ready for birthing. (37)

The Hosamane village is surrounded by rising water, and the settlement becomes an island. The harmonious co-existence between the family and the river is driven into an unsettled relation. The author's brilliancy lies in transforming the island into a site of contrapuntal ties among the family members of Duggajja. His son Ganappayya lands in an unspeakable ambiguity raised by his anxiety to leave the island and not overlook his father's wish. Duggajja wished to stay in the village until his last breath. He passes away in the middle of the story.⁶ The unspeakable anguish of being detached from the rest of the world widens the relation between the husband and the wife. Ironically, the detachment from the rest of the world fails to strengthen the relationships among the family members. The rift with the outside world weakens the intimacy among the stranded family members; further, the isolation is accompanied by the fear of submersion. The inner self of Nagamani attains an identity crisis with the arrival of Krishnayya, who was her childhood friend at her father's home. Each individual behaves differently in times of crisis. The spectrum of hope, faith, trust, belief, fear, and humanity can be debated and

elaborated on through the perspectives of the three members of the family. The river Sharavathi becomes a testimonial site of polemical narratives that range from the anxiety of being ignored by modernity to the ambiguity of being in a helpless situation to make oneself visible. The island becomes a sign of hope, but the rising river at the back of the dam threatens the hope of sustaining their settlement and lives.

The book is further enriched by D'Souza's lived experience in the very environs where his novella is set. Personal observations make his narratives authentic and authoritative. The story comes out from the deeply supported ethnographic descriptions, albeit the story is a reasonably simple novella. The novelist worked in the Karnataka Public Works Department in Linganamakki. He keenly observed the predicament of people who became the subject of displacement in the Malenadu regions. The author's "Note" to the novella gives testimonial accounts of the suffering of displaced people thus:

The villagers were compensated with money and land elsewhere. I have seen people dismantling their homes, loading their extended families and their belongings onto lorries and bullock carts, and going away to wherever land was allotted to them. But who helped them cope with their grief and fear, having to uproot themselves from everything familiar, from a way of life based on a value system they had known for generations? Nobody thought of that. On the other hand, crafty government officials exploited these people who were ignorant of the ways of the outside world. They sought bribes, they harassed and cheated them. (xii)

In one of his interviews, the writer unveils the personal interactions with a displaced family, which gave birth to the novella. He shares emotional empathy with a low-income family, which lost their shelter after the completion of the Sharavathi dam/Linganamakki dam. The compensation for

the family was not yet decided. However, the water of the river reached the threshold of the family. The husband and wife went through a strange trauma of being out of place. The plight of the family inspired him to write the novella as he says, “I poured my sorrow at their plight into *Dweepa (Island)*. It is the story of a man who is forced to lose his community identity and fails to cope with his newfound individuality” (xii).

Loss of identity is seen not only in humans but also in the river Sharavati. As the novella progresses, the Sharavathi river becomes the source of fear. The writer pervades the effects of the dam project on the ecological chain. The story says that human beings and animals feel dislocated and try to occupy new territories where human beings live. The life of animals is also disturbed:

Wild animals like the tiger, cheetah, bison, and wild boar lived in the Malenadu forests but they lived in their own territory most of the time. Now with all the extra water around, they could be scared too. (51)

The presence of wild animals at the back of his house makes Ganappayy even more “apprehensive.” The space of living is entwined with fear and recklessness. Simultaneously, the story unfolds the changing nature of the relationship among the family members of Ganapayya. Nagaveni and her husband Ganapayya stay back, even while their fields are under the threat of being submerged by the water of the newly built dam. A shade of complexity rises with the arrival of Krishnappa who comes to stay with the family following the suggestion of Nagaveni’s father. He is an indispensable farmhand. Both Nagaveni and Krishanappa are fond of each other since their childhood. Nagaveni's mother moderated their emotional attachments and behaviours in their childhood. Krishnappa can also be metaphorically compared

with the dam, which disturbs the relation between the river and the families living on the bank of the river. Ganapayya is caught between the betrayal of the river Sharavathi and the disappointment with the corrupt government officials. His wife's excitement towards her childhood friend intensifies his existential crisis. However, a closer reading reveals the ambiguous matrix that fits together into the elegant montage of D'Souza's narratives. As a reader, one can see a parallel story: the visibility of the human-made disaster on nature and the self-imposed complexity of Ganapayya in understanding the declining relationship with his wife. His pain is double-edged — the pain of losing the source of survival and angst due to loss of companionship. Hence, as the river rises, the intensity of ambiguity also increases.

The novella hence, as the reviewer Naresh Keerthy points out, “is used to connote isolation in the spatial as well as emotional senses.” (“No Translation is an Island”, 2014) At the climax of the novella, both Krishayya and Nagaveni immerse themselves in the waters of Sharavathi and die. This episode gives a tragic sense. Metaphorically, they both attain *moksha* by losing their lives in the same river. The river, hence, becomes a symbolic site for the unification of two souls. Overall, the river becomes a site of memories and testimony of predicaments of members of the family.

Conclusion

The novella's complicated plot includes Ganapayya's dilemma of whether to leave the native place or stay back until the last breath and the indescribable attraction between Krishnappa and Nagaveni and the taboos of marital fidelity or virtue. The author uses these as a counterpoint for more significant debates — the darker sides of modernity and development that cut some more profoundly than others and

the relationship of humans with nature — a curious blend of attachment, fear, reverence, and hostility.

Notes

1. While studying the Jain phase in the early Kannada literature, Edward P. Rice mentions the above mentioned English translation of the Kannada work in his *A History of Kannada Literature*. *Kavirajamarga* is said to have been written in 850 AD by both Amoghavarsha-I and Sri Vijaya.
2. G.S. Shivarudrappa, “To Unseen Sea,” accessed from <http://raveendrahosadurga.blogspot.com/2019/05/translation-of-cheluvu-olavu-by-dr.html>
3. The Bandaya movement is a literary movement started by D R Nagaraj and Shurdra Shrinivas in the 1970s in Karnataka. The poets of this literary trait treated poetry as an agency of social equality and assertion against economic inequalities.
4. It is my translation of his views expressed in the Kannada language.
5. Read Mike Levien’s “Narmada and the Myth of Rehabilitation” and Amita Baviskar’ “The Political Uses of Sociology: Tribes and the Sardar Sarovar Project” for the better understanding of the social issues created by the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Project.
6. The renowned Kannada film director Girish Kasaravalli made an art film (*Dweepa*, 2002) based on the novella. In the cinematic representation of the story, Duggajjaya dies while performing *nema* in the climax of the novel. He chooses his death before seeing the river swallowing his land and home.

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15

The Ganga on the Celluloid A Feminist Reading of Select Films

Malvika Sharad

Introduction

Be it Paul Robeson singing about the Blacks toiling hard near the Mississippi river and longing to go back to their homeland river Jordan or Bhupen Hazarika singing the horrors created by the Brahmaputra or asking *Ganga Behti Ho Kyun?* (O Ganga! Why do you flow?), or William Wordsworth and R.L. Stevenson depicting rivers in their poetry, rivers have always formed a part of popular culture. Similarly, various films have been made in both India and abroad with a major river forming their backdrop — bringing popular culture to every household and to every screen. But before one goes deeper into enumerating these films and their analysis, it becomes pertinent to discuss the underpinnings of the popular culture in which rivers are showcased.

Films are not only visual representations, but they can also be read as texts. They have a context, a storyline, a logical flow of events and most often a socio-political message/

theme to convey. Films often build popular narratives that are woven into the critical imagination of people and these narratives are perpetuated as these films are watched over and over again by a large number of people. Films are not only a collection of moving frames meant for entertainment, but the visuality therein gives birth to several themes which when watched together in one frame makes sense to the questioning minds. And thus, various mainstream films are entrenched in popular culture with socio-political underpinnings of their themes. Many films have had rivers in their backdrop and in this chapter, we will delve deeper into how the Ganga — one of the perennial rivers of India, is portrayed through films as a popular visual literary culture. The Ganga has been prominent in several films. For an analysis, three films have been chosen, viz. Raj Kapoor's *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, Deepa Mehta's *Water* and Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan*. There are various overarching themes in all the three films, intertwined together with the Ganga in their backdrop as the uniting factor. But a major reason for choosing these films is that, women in all the three films form important characters which coincides with the femininity of the river Ganga. Various women centric themes form the plots and subplots of these films. What are these themes that emerge out of these films and what significance they add to the Ganga as well as its representation in India's popular culture are the broader questions that will be discussed in this chapter. It is important to mention here that the three films that have been chosen are separated by a considerable amount of time frame. Separated by 20 (*Ram Teri Ganga Maili* and *Water*) and 10 (*Water* and *Masaan*) odd years, the films and the themes connecting them are timeless, just like the Ganga that flows seamlessly defeating and standing the test of time. The three films are also similar in terms of women forming strong and influential characters.

Overview of the films

Having mentioned the outline of the chapter and the three films chosen for analysis, the plot, and storyline of each will be elaborated upon.

In *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, Ganga is a young woman who lives in Gangotri with her brother. Naren Sahay, the male protagonist visits Gangotri on an educational tour and falls in love with Ganga. Both get married on the following *puranmashi* and their marriage is consummated. Naren leaves with a promise to come back and take Ganga with him. However, when he does not return for a long time, Ganga who delivers a son, decides to go to Calcutta to meet Naren and secure a safe future for their son. But she meets with an ill fate during her journey and is molested as well as tricked into joining a brothel in Banaras (Varanasi). Having no option of a livelihood to take care of herself and her son, she is forced to surrender before the circumstances and is engaged in the brothel when one day, two men visit Banaras and mesmerised by Ganga's beauty and talent, pay a hefty sum to take Ganga to Calcutta as their mistress. As the story unfolds further, it turns out that the two men were Naren's own father and his friend (whose daughter Naren is supposed to marry). During Naren's marriage function, Ganga is brought to dance and Naren recognizes the girl dancing in the veil to be his love, Ganga; Naren then stops the wedding and despite severe opposition from his family, he takes Ganga and his son along with him and leaves.

Water is a 2005 film set in 1938, when India was still under the British rule. It is a story of widows in Banaras who live in a widow *ashram* to relieve themselves of bad *karma* and their families of the financial burden of taking care of them. Chuiya is an eight-year-old girl whose husband passes away suddenly and she is brought to the *ashram* as per the tradition.

The *ashram* is run by a pompous woman, Madhumati who heads it. There is Kalyani who is a pretty and friendly woman who befriends Chuiya and is pimped by Madhumati into prostitution (as called then), which is a source of income for the *ashram*. Chuiya is also cared for by Shakuntala, a fierce and bold widow in the ashram whom Madhumati is also afraid of. Kalyani falls in love with Narayan, a follower of Mahatma Gandhi and they decide to get married. One day in her playfulness, Chuiya reveals about their affair to Madhumati who, afraid to lose the source of income for the *ashram*, tries to forcefully dissuade Kalyani from going ahead with her decision. However, Shakuntala helps Kalyani in escaping from the *ashram*. When Kalyani is with Narayan on the boat and as it nears Narayan's house, she recognizes it to be the house of the man to whom Kalyani had been pimped as Narayan's father. Shocked and heartbroken, Kalyani asks to turn the boat and later drowns herself in the Ganga. On the other hand, Madhumati sends Chuiya as a replacement for Kalyani to be pimped and even though Shakuntala tries her best to prevent the horror, it is too late. Shakuntala finds a traumatized and unconscious Chuiya, and hands her over to Narayan, on a moving train after attending Gandhi's address the next day. Teary eyed, Shakuntala watches the train pass by taking away Chuiya from all that the women in the *ashram* had been subjected to.

Masaan is a 2015 Bollywood film set in the present-day Banaras which has two separate stories going on that finally converge in the end. Devi Pathak who is a trainer at a coaching centre goes away with her student cum lover to a hotel where they are involved in sexual activities. Suddenly there is a raid of police who find the couple in a compromised situation and the police inspector clicks pictures of the barely clad Devi threatening to make them viral. Devi's lover, Piyush, afraid and embarrassed locks himself up in the bathroom and

kills himself by slitting his wrists. Here, the inspector starts blackmailing Devi and her father by saying that he will make Devi's pictures public if he is not given a sum of Rs 300,000. Devi's father is then embroiled in amassing the amount by indulging in a betting game at the Ganga ghat wherein a little boy Jhonta (who works for Devi's father), along with others dives into the Ganga to bring back coins that settle on the river bed when people throw them in the river. The news of Devi's tainted reputation reaches her workplace and as a result she has to quit her job only to find a government job in the railways where also the news of her past reaches.

Another story in the film is that of Deepak Chaudhary, a boy belonging to the Dom caste (Dalits who cremate the dead) who studies at a polytechnic college and Shalu Gupta, an upper caste girl who fall in love with each other. When Deepak reveals to Shalu about his family background and the work that they do, she tells him that even though her family will not agree to their relationship, keeping in mind their casteist attitude, she would be with him and will go ahead with the marriage. She motivates him to study hard and find a job. However, Shalu dies in an unfortunate bus accident when she goes on a pilgrimage with her family. Unaware of the incident, Deepak is helping his kin in disposing and cremating the dead bodies when he finds Shalu's corpse and is shattered. He keeps Shalu's ring as a memory and is drowned in grief. He slowly overcomes his grief, studies well and finds a job as an engineer and throws away the ring he had kept with him in the Ganga.

On the other side of the plot, Jhonta falls ill while playing the game of bringing back coins. Devi's father who is ashamed of his act of jeopardizing a young boy's life decides to never indulge in that game again but Jhonta hands him over a ring that he finds in the river bed. Devi's father sells the ring and is able to pay the amount to the inspector. Burdened by

the happenings in her life, Devi finds and joins a course in Allahabad University and goes away to the city where she visits Piyush's house. She is slapped by Piyush's father after which she goes to the *Sangam* (confluence) to drown the gift Piyush had given her on the day they were together in the hotel. As Devi sobs, she finds Deepak sitting there who offers her water. The boatman nearby beckons the two who sit on the boat and strikes a conversation as the boat is rowed.

As the three films discussed above unfold, a number of themes come to the fore contextualized by the Ganga. They can be analysed as follows.

Placeness of Banaras as a Hub of the Ganga

As the Ganga flows through different terrains, towns and cities spring around it bringing to life thriving ecosystems of everyday living. It is in the context of these towns and cities that these three films chosen here are analysed to begin with. One of the most important cities on the banks of the Ganga is Banaras or Varanasi which is also known as Kashi. The river Ganga builds the 'placeness' of Banaras. The Ganga flows through various places and terrains of Banaras. Thus, Banaras comes into existence because of the Ganga; in other words, as the Ganga flows through a particular region in the state of Uttar Pradesh, the city of Banaras takes birth, as it has been the case since olden civilisations that towns and cities emerge near water bodies like rivers. Therefore, the city of Banaras is born near the Ganga. And all the three films have a large influence of the city in their stories. *Water* and *Masaan* are set in Banaras while in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, the characters are constantly visiting the city. The city is considered holy as it is situated by the Ganga. The holiness of the city amounts to a plethora of rituals being held in Banaras — rituals that are sacred and entail a significant

portion of all the films chosen here. In *Water*, Shakuntala and Kalyani are constantly shown bathing and taking holy dips in the Ganga as well as performing sacred rituals near it. The *ashram* is situated in Banaras near the Ganga because of its piousness and holy significance. Similarly, in *Masaan*, the Doms, who cremate the dead bodies, live in Banaras by the Ganga and perform the last rites of a person as the city and the river are considered to be the holiest last abode of a person. It is considered auspicious to die in Banaras and this is well brought out in the way the film is set. Devi Pathak's father also has a small shop on the Ganga *ghat* and he has been a well-known professor of Sanskrit in the city — a subject that is considered holy by many is taught in the sacred city of Banaras near the pious river of Ganga. In *Water*, too, Shakuntala takes refuge in Panditji's sermons and teachings who preaches sitting by the bank of the Ganga. Here again, the philosophy of the holy scriptures is narrated near the holy river.

In the Hindu faith, the holy river Ganga and Banaras absolve one of all the sins, wrong deeds and grief. In *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, Naren's father, uncle, and to-be father-in-law constantly reiterate that "*Ganga mein paap dhoenge,*" (We will wash our sins in the Ganga). Similarly, Kalyani in *Water*, after realizing that she had committed the biggest sin of impurity and shame on seeing Narayan's house, decides to drown herself in the Ganga for the ultimate cleansing. In *Masaan*, Deepak throws away Shalu's ring in the Ganga to get rid of all his painful memories and all his despair. The all-engulfing Ganga takes it all in itself to unburden those who seek comfort from it. The river, thus, becomes the resort of peace for the turbulent minds/souls.

Banaras is also a hub for several socio-cultural activities in the films and it is true in reality too. The class structure of the inhabitants of Banaras is a major trope in the select

movies. It is mainly due to the lower socio-cultural status that the marginal characters indulge in certain kinds of activities for their livelihood while the rich and affluent indulge in the sinful acts for their pleasure and for showing their status. In *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, an elaborate brothel is situated in Banaras wherein Ganga, the female lead of the film learns to sing and dance and make money through sex work/prostitution. Similarly, in *Water*, Kalyani and Chuiya are pimped by Madhumati to the big patrons in Banaras and that is how they earn a living for the *ashram*. Banaras and Ganga, therefore, complement each other in one nestling the other in various aspects. Ironically, the holy place thus is also depicted as the abode of various sins and exploitation of the marginal. A parallelism can be observed here that the holiness of the river and the contrasting sinfulness of the people occur simultaneously in the films' actions which demythify and challenge the popular notion of holiness of Banaras as a holy place for the existence of the holy river Ganga by it.

Purity and Pollution

Another major theme in all the three films is the theme of purity and pollution. At the outset, it should be mentioned that the "purity" of the Ganga is juxtaposed with all the pollution that it has been subjected to. In the name of *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* itself, the phrase "*Ganga maili*" denotes the pollution or profanity of both the river Ganga literally and that of the female lead Ganga figuratively for being subjected to (sexual) exploitation at the hands of pimps and rich patrons. The song sequence *Ram teri Ganga maili ho gayee, paapiyon ke paap dhote dhote* (Ram, your Ganga has become polluted washing the sin of the sinners) in the film with the background of the flowing river becomes a

significant metaphorical trope of exploitation of women and her sexuality/body. Equating *nadi* (river) with *nari* (woman), the song recounts the tale of the river/goddess Ganga's ascending to the earth from heaven to wash the sins of people and it also has the chant of "Har Har Gange" in the lyric. In one way, it talks about the pollutant elements in the river Ganga, and of the female characters' loss of honour, on the other. Likewise, in *Water*, Kalyani and Chuiya are pimped to patrons and the act is considered to be a polluted one, that only widows can undertake as it is too unholy for the women of the common married folks to do that. Similarly, in *Masaan*, Devi is shamed throughout her workplaces and neighbourhood as the news of her sexual involvement with her lover travels. It is interesting to note here that any kind of sex work or voluntary consensual involvement in sexual activity without an institutional marriage is regarded as a polluting and sinful act when, on the other hand, that very act becomes a source of livelihood for those involved in it (in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* and *Water*) and an extension of one's agency on one's body and mind (in *Masaan*).

In *Masaan*, purity and pollution have a different angle as well. Deepak being a Dalit boy, is considered to be impure owing to the job he does, that is cremating the dead bodies. He is warned by his friends — "*ladki upper caste hai*" (the girl is from an upper caste). When Deepak drops Shalu home, just before she leaves for the pilgrimage, he asks her if she would be able to accept him and his family because of their social position. There is an inherent sense of being "impure" that pervades Deepak's mind. An important point to note here is that while in the other two films, the sites of pollution are women and in *Masaan* too, we have Devi who is projected as the impure, in the same film we now also have a man, who becomes the site of impurity or pollution because of his social location. Thus, the theme of pollution and purity cuts

across the gender parameter in the films taken for analysis here. One must notice in the three films that some of the lead characters are to an extent deviant from the normative structure of the society or they are ousted from the common structure of social life; such depiction is in consonance with the river Ganga who has to come to the earth as a deviant journey from the heaven being cursed by the sage Durvasa as found in some popular myth narratives in the blog *The Story of Ganga* (2012).

Placing the above against the backdrop of the Ganga, one finds that the river which is known to be the river of the Gods since ages, is heavily polluted due to human intervention and activities. Pouring of the cities' sewage as well as the sludge from the industries in the Ganga, defecating, drowning dead bodies in it are all acts which have led to severe pollution of the river. In consonance with that, several initiatives have been undertaken by many governments to clean the Ganga and bring it back to a potable and consumable state. Thus, pollution of the Ganga is being mitigated to bring it back to its purity — a rather literal translation of the theme of purity and pollution.

Women as Embodiments of Ganga

Just as the Ganga passes through various terrains and is subjected to ups and downs in its course, the women of all the three films too go through meandering trajectories. Ganga, the female lead in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, is abandoned by her husband in Gangotri after which she embarks upon a journey to Calcutta and is exploited by men during her journey which takes her to Banaras where she is pushed into a brothel; she is then brought to Calcutta by patrons and is finally united with her husband Naren like the river Ganga which after undertaking a long and tumultuous journey from

the Himalayas to northern India is finally assimilated in the Bay of Bengal. Kalyani in *Water* is a free spirited woman, as much as she could be, given the clutches of the rules and regulations for the *ashram* of widows. She dares to love, to keep her hair long unlike the other widows, have a pet puppy and befriends Chuiya despite Madhumati's terror and domination in the *ashram*. She again is like Ganga, flowing seamlessly, no matter what impediments come in its course. She is like an *alhadisarita* (young river). Chuiya, the young girl in *Water* is as innocent and as compassionate as the Ganga in its early stages springing out of its source in the Himalayas and providing refuge and respite to millions of people in the cities on its banks with a wide expanse and a considerate, solemn demeanour. Chuiya brings love and laughter to the inhabitants of the *ashram*, painstakingly gets aunty (the oldest widow of the *ashram*) a *laddu* and is full of kindness. Shakuntala, the well-read and fierce woman of the widow *ashram* in *Water* is like the Ganga in its furious state when it gets flooded. Shakuntala is not afraid to assert herself in front of Madhumati or Narayan when he visits the *ashram*. Neither is she afraid of standing up for Chuiya and rescuing her from the horrors of the *ashram* and venturing out fearlessly to hand her over to Narayan on a moving train. Shakuntala, therefore, is like the Ganga, fearless and boundless, reaching its destination despite the rugged trajectories. Devi Pathak in *Masaan* is another courageous woman in the face of all odds. She not only stands up for herself when snarled at by the pinching jibes of her colleagues and neighbours but also finds a living for herself and takes care of her father and pulls herself up to begin afresh. She, too, is like the Ganga, which not only is a perennial source of water for millions in north India but also is the mother river for many other small rivers — its tributaries, thereby giving life and livelihoods to many in the country as it flows with determination and vigour. The

women in all the three films, therefore, are the embodiments of Ganga —free spirited, fierce, seamless, compassionate, considerate, resilient, fearless, and regenerating.

Capitalization of the Ganga

Capitalizing the Ganga is also a theme that comes up in the three films — not only the capitalization of the Ganga but also of the women in the films. The Ganga Action Plan started by Rajiv Gandhi is mentioned in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* which also becomes a source of corruption and corrupt politics in the film. Secondly, Ganga — the heroine of the film and her body become the site of making money by sending her to a brothel and thereby extracting money through her. Similarly, in *Water*, Kalyani and Chuiya are capitalized on by pimping them to bring money for the *ashram*. In one of the scenes in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, one of the characters, who is also a capitalist cum politician, speaks of cleansing the Ganga with the sole intention of churning out money from the implementation of the Ganga Action Plan. In one of the scenes in the film, that very character is standing in front of a poster that propagates the cleaning of Ganga. Here, a good intention towards cleaning the Ganga is shown, whereas, one can clearly juxtapose it with the malicious intentions of the villainous character who only wants to make money out of the cleaning project. The contrast between the cleansing of the Ganga and the murkiness of the character's intentions is well brought out. In *Masaan*, numerous livelihoods erupt around the Ganga. From Jhonta's betting game to Devi Pathak's father's small shop on the Ganga *ghat* and to the Doms' professional arena being the *ghats* of Banaras, the river Ganga forms the site for the professional endeavours or livelihoods of many. Similarly, the inspector in *Masaan*

capitalises on Devi's shame and risk of a tainted reputation, and coerces money out of her father. Therefore, the feminine river and the femininity in all the three films are capitalised upon.

Letting Go — with the Ganga

An important theme that forms an important part of the three films is the theme of letting go just as the Ganga engulfs everything in it and washes all away. In *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, Ganga goes through a chaotic journey for meeting her husband wherein she is molested and exploited by several men. She carries a huge emotional burden with herself as she reaches Calcutta. However, on meeting Naren, she does not harp on her ordeal and is ready to be united with him letting go of all that she has suffered. In *Water*, Kalyani, on the realization of her biggest mistake/misfortune, simply drowns herself in the Ganga. She does not rebel, does not oppose but simply lets all her pain to be washed away in the Ganga when she drowns herself in it. The expression on her face as she is drowning in the Ganga is that of releasing all that was clenched to submitting to the divine without any questions or rebuttals. Shakuntala also lets Chuiya go with Narayan after all the horrors of the *ashram* that the little girl is subjected to; Shakuntala takes her and sends her off as an ultimate act of letting go. In *Masaan*, Deepak, after great misery, pain, and grief lets go off Shalu's memories by throwing her ring in the water. Holding onto those memories was futile as life had to go on. Deepak, given his social location, could not afford to live with his grief and let it consume him. He had to let go of love, the pain and the memories and he does so by taking the assistance of the Ganga. Devi Pathak too lets go off the shame and the disrepute for her sexual

involvement with her lover with great a resilience spirit moving on to a journey of self-reliance and independence. All of these characters in all these films are like the Ganga, full of resilience and regenerative spirits washing away all that is unwanted, moving away all that do not serve them any good any more into oblivion and then move forward, flowing unhindered.

Having discussed various themes in the three films, it is important to mention here that even though all the films are strongly women-centric, feminism portrayed in all the films is not intersectional. All the women in all the three films come from more or less the same social milieu and thus intersectionality in the feminism of the films is missing. But, in all the three films, the women are on a journey of self-exploration, braving odds and in the process of discovering themselves. As Nabanipa Bhattacharjee (2004) mentions in her review of the work *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*, the films put forth a victimized and non-victimized image of women. Ganga in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* and several women of the *ashram* in *Water* are victims of patriarchy and oppressive customs rooted in patriarchy. However, few women in *Water* break the shackles of victimhood and become assertive. In *Masaan*, women are headstrong and have a mind of their own from the very beginning. Women in these three films can be categorised into three categories — victims, rebels and transgressors. While Ganga in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* and almost all women of the *ashram* in *Water* are victims, we also have women like Shakuntala in *Water* who are rebels. Devi Pathak and Deepak's love interest Shalu in *Masaan* are transgressors in the sense that they dare to break the silence around physical intimacy and opt for an inter-caste union. Therefore, feminism depicted in these films goes through a meandering path and is not devoid of limitations.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, popular culture often moves beyond the realms of entertainment and leisure into the trajectories of social, cultural and political life. The three films chosen here are a mirror of our society, of the values and moral fabric in which our society operates and consequently the politics that it picks up — be it the portrayal of women in our society through these films or the caste system or subjects like sex work and consensual sex that are still a taboo for a big section in our society. The river Ganga is used as a background and *locale* to portray all these themes and contextualise them in the modern times as these films depict how our society and its ever changing politics are unravelling. On the one hand, we have films like *Water* which set in the pre-independence times speaks of the conservatism towards widows and their exploitation, and on the other hand, we have films like *Masaan*, wherein consensual involvement in sexual activity becomes a glaring theme of the film, still with the taboos attached to it. In between, of course, we have *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, wherein before the economic liberalisation of the 90s, women were considered to be weak and powerless as portrayed by the female lead of the film who throughout the film meets unfortunate circumstances and is always left at the mercy of men to reach her destination. Both *Water* and *Masaan*, portray women of a different stature than that portrayed in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* and it is then that we can gauge how much our society has changed from the pre-independence era to the mid-1980s up to the present 2000s with the changing social and political mores of the times. The river Ganga then gives all these films and themes a foregrounding, set in the backdrop of which several important narratives and conversations can

be struck. The silver screen and the depiction of the Ganga on it are powerful tools for these narratives.

Be it the embodiment of women as Ganga or Ganga giving ‘placeness’ to the city of Banaras, the river as an idea, image and metaphor is on which the three films are hinged. Ganga gives all the films a broader canvas and backdrop for the interplay of the characters and the plots, thereby bringing out a feminist reading of the films. To delve deeper into the films, it is important to understand the centrality of the river to the films and look at the microcosms in the films in the context of the macrocosm of the Ganga.

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Biographical Notes

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Arzuman Ara is an Associate Professor of ELE in the English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong campus. She was a visiting faculty at Oakton Community College, USA, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, NERIE-NCERT, Shillong campus. Her writings are published in India and abroad on Literature, Film, Culture Studies and language pedagogy. She writes poetry and also translates them. Her translation of Imtiaz Mahmud's *Maxim* is published from Bangladesh. Her upcoming publication includes an English translation of Imtiaz Mahmud's poetry collection *Kalo Kautuk*, an authored volume on *Critical Pedagogy and English Studies in India* and two edited volumes on *Revisiting Partition* and *Visual Cultures of India*. She has co-edited *Indian Narrative Traditions* and

Narrative Cultures of Northeast India. She has produced course materials for different academic institutions. She is the recipient of Barkakati Journalism Award, 2004.

Arkadeb Bhattacharya is pursuing M.Phil. in Medieval History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His research includes examining the narratives of travel embedded in the performative and didactic literatures of early modern Bengal. His academic interest lies in the patterns of migration and agrarian expansion in precolonial Bengal. He is proficient in Sanskrit and Persian.

Chand Basha M. is an Assistant Professor of English at Vijayanagara Sri Krishnadevaraya University, Ballari, Karnataka (India). He is also a Research Associate at the Shia' Institute, London, United Kingdom. He teaches world literature, literary criticism, and cultural studies. His doctoral project grapples with the works of Orhan Pamuk. His areas of interest include decolonial thought, contemporary literature, and sites of memory.

D. Jyothirmai is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English in Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajamahendravaram. His research interest is on the fiction of Sefi Atta. His research works are published in different journals both in India and abroad on Telegu and English literature.

I. Amenla Changkija is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics, EFL University, Shillong campus. Her research interest includes Applied Linguistics, Folklores, Socio-linguistics and Discourse Analysis. She has a number of publications on ELT, Discourse Analysis and linguistic cultures of Northeast India. She has co-edited *Language and Discourse: Culture, Literature and Pedagogy in North East India*.

Jibu Mathew George teaches in the School of Literary Studies, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. His areas of research include literary modernism, twentieth-century European fiction in translation, twentieth century literary theory, narratology, philosophy of literature, meta-questions in the humanities, philosophy and history of religion, continental philosophy, philosophy of history, hermeneutics, European intellectual history, life span psychology, and Holocaust studies. He is the author of *The Ontology of Gods: An Account of Enchantment, Disenchantment, and Re Enchantment* (New York/Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), *Ulysses Quotidiānus: James Joyce's Inverse Histories of the Everyday* (New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), and *Philosophical Meta-Reflections on Literary Studies: Why Do Things with Texts, and What to Do with Them?* (London: Anthem Press, 2019). He is currently editing a multi-volume international anthology of essays entitled *De Natura Fidei: Rethinking Religion across Disciplinary Boundaries*. He featured in the Oxford Academic Index of Critics in 2018. He was a Research Fellow at the Zürich James Joyce Foundation in 2008. In the same year he also received a DAAD Scholarship for studies at Technische Universität Dresden, and a scholarship offered by University College, Dublin. He is editor of the literary studies issues of the English and Foreign Languages Journal, and pre-publication reviewer for Springer, Dordrecht, Routledge, New Delhi, and Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad.

Kailash C. Baral is presently the Vice Chairman of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), Kolkata, an institute under the Ministry of Culture, GOI, Professor Baral superannuated from the English and Foreign Languages University as Professor of English and India Studies. He is also a former Pro-Vice Chancellor of the EFL

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Kotti Sree Ramesh is a Professor of English in Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajamahendravaram, Andhra Pradesh, India. He is presently the Principal of the University College of Arts & Commerce. He was a Pre-doctoral Fulbright Scholar, at Harvard University. He has published articles in various scholarly journals and his book, *Claude Mckay: Literary Identity from Jamaica to Harlem* was published by McFarland, USA. He teaches, Postcolonial, American and British Literatures. Interested in environment, especially rivers, he made a documentary film on *Errakaluva*, (<https://youtu.be/wEczF4mjZzs>) in West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh. He is the recipient of the State Best Teacher Award for the year 2015.

Malvika Sharad is currently working as the Editorial Assistant at the Economic & Political Weekly, Mumbai. She has extensively researched on Social Work, Dalit and Tribal Studies etc. Malvika's academic interest lies in studying the intersections of gender and social exclusion.

Praveen Mirdha is an Associate Professor of English, Government Girls' College, Ajmer, Rajasthan. She has authored *Madness: Perspectives and Representations in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (2016). Her research articles on Partition Fictions of the Indian Sub-Continent, Cultural Exoticism in Joseph Conrad's short-story 'Amy Foster', Women's Voices depicted in the novels and short stories of Indian women authors, Terrorism and Madness, Human Rights Stories,

Diasporic Imaginaries in literature and Translating Oralities have been published in various edited volumes, national and international journals. Her literary interests include Fictional writings, Women's Writings, Travel Writing, Cross-cultural Writings and Comparative Literatures, Translation Studies and Bhasha Literatures.

P. Muralidhar Sharma is an Assistant Professor in the School of English, Gangadhar Meher University. His research interests include Literature and the Performing Arts, Comparative Indian Literature, and Women's Studies. He has published papers in journals like South-Asian Review and Margins, and his research interest is in the constructions of the female performing body in Indian literatures and cultures. He is a trained Kathak dancer, and his understanding of literature is chiefly shaped by his experience of performance.

Sanghamitra Rai Verman is presently teaching at Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India. She specialises in ancient Indian History. Her area of research is ancient Indian textiles Arts and crafts. She has written many articles pertaining to her area of research and related fields. Her researches are mainly focussed into socio-economic history, Indian cultural heritage, arts and crafts etc. Her articles have been published in various peer-reviewed journals, magazines, newspapers of national and international repute.

Shaona Barik is working as an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Visva Bharati Santiniketan, India. She has researched on "Haunted by the Empire: Representations of the Occult and the Uncanny in Colonial Fiction about India, 1870-1940". She has published articles related to Victorian society and culture, cultural exchanges between India and

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Subir Dhar has taught for over 30 years at Rabindra Bharati University, serving as Director of the University's School of Languages and Culture, Honorary Director of its Tagore-Gandhi Centre, and as English Department Head. He has also served for a time as a Chancellor-nominated officiating Vice-Chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University. He is currently engaged in Sister Nivedita University (Kolkata) as Director, School of International Languages, and as the Dean of the School of Humanities. Professor Dhar is a co-Editor of two UGC CARE-listed journals, and is the General Secretary of the Shakespeare Society of Eastern India.

Surajit Sen is teaching English and working as the Deputy Registrar (Examination) at ICFAI University Meghalaya. He has several publications on multidisciplinary areas in national and international journals of repute as well as in edited volumes. His research interests include Postcolonial Studies, Diaspora Studies, L2 Education/Teaching, Communication Studies and Sociolinguistics. He has co-edited *Indian Narrative Traditions* and *Narrative Cultures of Northeast India*.

Sweta Tiwari is currently with the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology as one of the first batch of faculty members in Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari, Bihar. Sweta is a keen observant of the everyday lives of human beings that are often considered too mundane to be perceived by naked eyes. She has researched on the spatio-temporal dimensions of the ghats of Banaras. She has sieved

meanings out of the household chores and spaces such as the kitchen, toilet, rituals, and sacred gaze (darshan) through her unblinking and ever-alert gaze of a nuanced researcher. Sweta has also authored research papers published in journals of international repute.

Umesh Patra is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Motihari, Bihar. He worked on a comparative analysis of an Odia folk theatre named Pala and Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre for his PhD dissertation at EFLU, Hyderabad. His research area includes Theatre and Performance Studies, Modern British Literature, and Queer Theory. A few of his lectures are uploaded on E-Vimarsh: ICT initiative for E-learning by MGCU. Some of his writings have been published in *Sanglap*, *Research & Criticism*, *Muse India*, and *The Hindu*.