



Book of Abstracts

South Asian Water Imaginaries in an Era of Environmental Crisis

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Plenary

Thinking with Water: An Overview of Select Hydrofiction from India

Swarnalatha Rangarajan

Thinking with ‘Water’ (one of the *panchamahabhutas* in Indian philosophy) is indeed a complex, riddled question in the Anthropocene, a term coined by Eugene Storrer in the 1980s and popularized by Paul Crutzen in the 2000s, referring to a new epoch in which human actions have irreparably affected the planet. In the Anthropocene imagination, water takes on a multiplicity of forms—such as rising water, polluted water, bottled water, lack of water, etc—all pointing to the need for a truly material, embodied engagement with this vital substance. Therefore, the hypocritical turn in ecocriticism involves a deep reflection on how these multiple senses of water overlap in the textualization of waters—the submerged histories, aesthetics, and ontologies of “heavy waters” (to use DeLoughrey’s term). By thinking and reading critically with water via representative Indian narratives on water, this talk demonstrates how cultural forms percolate and question strategies of enclosure and accumulation that have historically determined water relations within the capitalist world-ecology and also connect us with the larger gestalts of the non-human world through flows, connections, and multiple becomings. These stories about thinking with water capture what Rob Nixon has called the slow violence of environmental degradation afflicting the world’s poorest and most vulnerable inhabitants and render visible the sociocultural dimensions of the environmental crisis in which unimagined communities undergo silent erasure.

Swarnalatha Rangarajan is Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras. She has worked extensively on ecocriticism, her major publications include *The Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication* (2019), *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* (2018), and *Ecocriticism of the Global South* (2015). She is also an editorial board member of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

Panel A: Vulnerable Communities and Water-related Crisis in South Asia

Hydrocapitalism and Infrastructural Becomings in Sarnath Banerjee's All Quiet in Vikaspuri
Agrima Mishra

The fluidity of water has lately been recognised as a transposer of ideas, meanings, and cultural flux. The circulation of urban water has affiliated itself with social power dynamics and control, rendering some sections exclusive and others marginalised. The production of urban water by tangible procedures of seizing, decontamination, and subsequent storage has additionally accentuated the discernibility of materiality. Furthermore, the material turn of the late twentieth century anticipated the current critical eye on the physical and social urban structures of water regulations and the hydro-infrastructures associated with them.

Sarnath Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015) explicates the hydro-crisis and wars for water in dystopian Delhi. The psychic plumber Girish's search for the river Saraswati as a corrective towards the water shortage unearths the multiple pretexts of this scarcity—faulty infrastructure, hydrocapitalism, and neoliberalism's scheme of privatisation. This paper shall attempt to trace the multifarious experiential realities of engaging with water in the urban context by employing theoretical insights from the field of Blue Humanities and Urbanism as proposed by various sociologists and theorists such as Bruno Latour, Henri Lefebvre, Serpil Oppermann, Steve Mentz, and Nikhil Anand, among others. The paper also seeks to uncover the multiple networked workings of water flows apropos material infrastructure, local power regimes, and discursive hydro-manifolds as sketched in Banerjee's work.

Agrima Mishra is currently pursuing her PhD in English Literature from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kharagpur. She obtained her MA in English from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. Her research interests include Blue Humanities, Indian Literatures in English, graphic narratives, and literary theory.



Development projects that threaten natural ecosystems, displace communities, and pose risk to environment, life, and livelihoods have been met with severe resistance from across the world. The Sardar Sarovar Dam project on the Narmada River in India is such an example that faced widespread resistance from local groups who faced imminent danger of inundation of land, loss of livelihood, and displacement. This paper aims to understand the issue of development-induced displacement projects in the Narmada Valley through a critical reading of Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994). A graphic novel that captures voices from across the spectrum, *The River of Stories* tells the tale of an important environmental struggle led by indigenous people. By giving a vivid account of the Rewa Valley project, modelled on the Narmada Valley, Sen tactfully brings out the experiences of the movement at multiple levels. Environmental struggles across the years have resonated with the story captured in the text. The dominant development narrative that is top-down in approach finds recurrent mention and is critiqued throughout the graphic novel. The paper argues that texts like Sen's not only capture the spirit of dissent and resistance but also offer rich insights into the far-reaching consequences of forced displacement. The literature on development induced displacement categorises such phenomena into three broad categories of displacement ushered by big dams, urban development and natural resource extraction. By trying to understand and recognize the eight types of risks as mentioned by Cernea's Impoverishment Risks and Reconstruction (IRR) model, the paper will try to elucidate how texts like *The River of Stories* significantly enrich existing scholarship on important development-induced displacement.

Vaishali Kashyap is a doctoral scholar at the Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, BITS Pilani, Goa.



Capital Flow, Protein Economy, and Prawn Aquaculture in Pratibha Ray's After the Deluge

Barsha Santra

Commercial prawn aquaculture on the eastern coast of India has expanded rapidly after trade liberalization initiatives were introduced in the early 1990s. The elimination of trade barriers coupled with high global demand for blue proteins turned prawn aquaculture into a lucrative source of foreign exchange for India. However, along with having a manifest ecological impact, commercial shrimp farming also widens the socioeconomic inequalities between indigenous small-scale fishing communities and the capitalist machinery focussed on exhaustive extraction of coastal resources.

Referring to Pratibha Ray's *After the Deluge* (2004), this paper will examine how the development of shrimp culture ponds catalysed the destruction of wetlands—primarily mangrove swamps—along the coastline of Odisha and had an adverse impact on the balance of the estuarine ecosystem. Reading the novelistic text as a testimony, it will argue that the felling of mangrove forests that acted as a protective belt against coastal disasters made the region vulnerable to cyclonic storms and floods to a far greater extent. The paper will analyze the novelistic representation of the devastating 1999 cyclone and its disastrous aftermath to foreground the contribution of unsustainable prawn aquaculture in aggravating the plight of communities living in this densely populated littoral region of the Bay of Bengal. It will suggest that the acquisition of coastal land by local elites not only falsifies the promises of livelihood opportunities for the poor through aquaculture but disengages and disempowers local communities from their rights over common lands and marine resources.

Barsha Santra is a doctoral scholar at the Department of Liberal Arts, Indian Institute of Technology Bhilai, working under the supervision of Dr Anubhav Pradhan. She is working towards a thesis titled “Blue Ecocriticism, Place, and Nonhuman Agency in South Asian Littoral Fiction.”

Panel B: Riverine Ecologies in South Asian fiction

Riparian Livelihoods of Bengal: Environmental Crisis and Twentieth Century Imagination

Chayana Mondal

With the ubiquity of rivers in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin and the advent of the Bengali novel in the nineteenth century, environmental changes in South Asian cultural imagination can be traced through vernacular literature. This paper shall examine livelihoods in river-centric novels set on the silt-laden rivers of southern Bengal in order to lay out the twentieth century environmental crisis by studying the vulnerability and resilience of riparian communities in relation to matter and nonhumans. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2012) state that matter in all its forms embodies its own narratives and hence matter becomes a site of narrativity, creating a polyphonic story involving nonhuman entities, bodily intra-actions, and material agency of actors. While attempting to form a water-based history (Mukherjee 2013, 2014, 2015) of Bengal, I shall also be delving into the intersectionality of caste, class, gender, and religion. For the scope of this paper, the following texts will be analysed: *Ganga* (1957) by Samaresh Basu, *Char Kashem* (1949) by Amarendra Ghosh, and *Muktobenir Ujjane* (1980) by Kalkut. These novels are set on the Ganga and its major distributaries, Padma and Bhagirathi, bifurcating at Mithipur. The abovementioned rivers are also part of the Ganga-Bhagirathi River system that contributes to the formation of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta.

Chayana Mondal is a PhD scholar and an NFSC-Junior Research Fellow at the Department of English, Jadavpur University. She has completed her Bachelor of Arts from the Women's Christian College, Kolkata and her Master of Arts from Jadavpur University. Her areas of interest include Environmental Humanities and South Asian Literature.

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Class, Gender, and Community in Manik Bandyopadhyay's The Boatman of the Padma

Barsha Mondal

The all-encompassing influence of rivers is well encapsulated in Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma* (2012), which serves as a unique tale of precarity and resilience

of one of the most neglected and terribly exploited communities in the world—the fisherfolk of South Asia. Bandyopadhyay, however, does not divulge into the Romantic notions of the natural world. Instead, he draws an ambiguous relation between the fisherfolk and the river Padma: a relationship which thrives as a source of aesthetic pleasure, sustenance, and nourishment, but also yields destruction and misery upon the vulnerable population. The social division within the fishing community also finds ground based on this ambivalent relation. The capricious river is the source of the Bengali ilish or hilsa, a sweet-water fish which is the staple food and the most important means of income for the fishing community. The men of the community who hold their lives on the line to procure money for their families get deceived, betrayed, and exploited both by the members of their own community and the so-called upper strata of the society. The women, being further marginalized, bear the brunt of their husbands, are told to bear sons as well as go out for work. Descriptions of the domestic, social, and economic life of the fisherfolk of the Padma serve to portray the obvious paradox embedded in the nature and quality of human relationships while acknowledging the river’s significant role in the formulation of the same. Relying upon a Marxist approach towards capitalistic labour division, the paper will unpack the hierarchical nature of class and gender in the Bengali fishing community and comment on the predicament of women in this community.

Barsha Mondal is currently awaiting her final semester results for MA degree in English Language and Literature from Calcutta University. She qualified NET December 2022 and WBSET 2023. She is interested in studying propaganda and how it shapes the psyche and mannerisms of the masses.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s Ichhamati: A Multifaceted Exploration of Nature, Culture, and Identity

Ridhima Narayan

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s *Restless Waters of the Ichhamati* (2018) is a literary masterpiece that intricately weaves the themes of nature, culture, and identity within the context of rural Bengal. The novel focuses on the exploitative practices of colonisers during the Indigo Rebellion in Bengal. The Ichhamati River serves as a vital element, symbolizing

both unity and division. It acts as a natural boundary between India and Bangladesh, representing the historical and cultural ties between these regions.

This paper will comment on the symbolic role of the Ichhamati, an ever-present force in Bandyopadhyay's works. Throughout the novel, the river's changing course mirrors the characters' shifting fortunes and emotions. Another focal point is the exploration of culture within the narrative. Instances where characters participate in traditional rituals highlight the river's role as a cultural repository, preserving age-old customs. Within this context, nature is portrayed not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic and sentient character that influences the lives, culture, and identities of the characters inhabiting Bandyopadhyay's literary landscape. The theories of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz emphasize how these cultural practices are not static but adaptive, evolving in response to the natural world's dynamics.

The intricate relationship between characters and their natural environment is also examined in this novel. Scenes where characters find solace or face adversity amidst the river's serene beauty underscore this dynamic. Philosopher Arne Naess and his concept of deep ecology illustrates how these interactions mould individual identities and contribute to the collective identity of a community. In examining the novel, this paper will also comment on the exploitation of riverscapes and the resulting environmental degradation, emphasizing the urgency of adopting sustainable practices to protect these vital ecosystems.

Ridhima Narayan is a postgraduate literature student at CCS University, Meerut. She is interested in feminism, environmental fiction, and trauma studies. She has a Bachelor's degree in English literature from Gargi College, University of Delhi. She is committed to exploring the ways in which literature can be used as a tool for social and environmental change.

Panel C: Hydrohumanities in South Asia

Tracing a Fictional Aquapelago: Reading Sarah Joseph's Aathi

Anna Jyothi James

Philip Hayward, who was one of the major spearheading figures of the concept of aquapelago, describes the concept as “an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters” (Hayward 5). The foundation of this concept gets its form through an oppositional stance from the idea of archipelagos, the latter being terra-centric. This paper aims to investigate the novel *Aathi* (Gift in Green) by Malayalam author Sarah Joseph, written in 2011, situating it within the framework of hydro-humanities. Kerala’s cultural geography is inherently entwined with its coastal and aquatic environment. This necessitates the adoption of a hydrological lens when considering the state’s socio-economic matrix, especially in light of anthropogenic environmental instabilities. *Aathi* situates itself around the eponymous aquapelago, an island collective where people’s lives are profoundly influenced and shaped by the surrounding water. The paper intends to analyze how the centrality of water in the text impacts its narrative and themes by examining the dynamic relationship between humans and water. *Aathi*, as envisioned by Sarah Joseph and as implied by its title, represents a genesis rooted in water, a fundamental essence from which all origins derive. Joseph also incorporates feminist sensibilities regarding the environment in the text, allowing for an exploration of the interconnected nature of women and the environment from an aquatic perspective. The text is pregnant with the active and fluid lives of coastal, watery, and underwater elements and how each of these constitute the cultural geography of this aquapelago. By examining *Aathi* with reference to these themes, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of the region’s aquatic environmental, cultural, and social milieu, emphasising the need for multidisciplinary approaches that transcend scientific and technological perspectives in addressing water-related issues.

Anna Jyothi James is a PhD scholar at the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the Central University of Kerala. She joined the institution in March 2023 and is working under supervision of Dr Shalini M. Her area of research is Blue/Hydro Humanities.\

Sayan Kandar

Even though coastal flooding, shoreline erosion, agricultural disruption, and soil salinization are not in the distant future, cultural representations of rising sea levels and changing rainfall patterns as well as their interconnected consequences with the onset of the climate crisis in South Asia, has been mostly simplistic, stereotypical, and far from the unique. Through close thematic analysis and detailed interpretation of cinematic apparatus (shots, camera movement, music, lighting, etc.), this paper explores how two films—*Kadvi Hawa* (2017) from India and *Nonajoler Kabbo* or *The Salt in Our Waters* (2020) from Bangladesh—provide a viewpoint which is more nuanced and grounded on lived experiences and first-hand details in order to illustrate the changing entanglement between rainfall, sea, and humans against the backdrop of the climate emergency. These two films expose how the spectrum of lived experience, the struggle to survive, and the inner turmoil of marginal lives extend to the changing rhythm of rainfall and sea. Accordingly, the paper will attempt to demonstrate that unlike many climate films focusing on South Asia as an exotic place of theatre for unimaginable devastation and suffering of climate victims, these films embody a departure as the characters are not used as mere vehicles to explore the crisis and the water induced factors and the specific realities of South Asia are intertwined with the particularities of the region's diverse social and water environment. The paper argues that these two films suggest a balanced and just approach to negotiating a rising sea, more intense cyclones, and altered precipitation with a kaleidoscope of social, political, and economic implications. In doing so, the paper asserts that these two films call attention to one of the key ideas in contemporary climate change discourse, the restructuring of the relation between place and identity as sea levels rise and altered precipitation reshapes the contours of place and redefines communities' identities.

Sayan Kandar is pursuing an MA in English from The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata. His research interests include Climate Change Induced Migration, Environmental Humanities, Literature from the Margins, and Disability Studies. He also works on Ganges erosion and human displacement in Nadia and Murshidabad in West Bengal.