

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 108

IIC

A DIALOGUE OF RIVERS

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The River & I*

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

How many of us have read river stories? Or river poems? How many of us have known a river? Most of us have crossed a river on a bridge, or may have taken a boat or a ferry, but I'm not sure how many of us have actually touched the river or felt the river. The river is not just cusecs of water that ecologists love to define. The river has its own rhythm. To be able to bring back rivers, to be able to bring back rivers to life, perhaps we need to understand its rhythm. We need to understand rivers as a body interconnected with ourselves.

River Dialogues is an attempt to have a free flowing conversation, as free flowing as a river should be and can be without dams coming in between, and try and re-imagine or possibly imagine for most of us who have not felt the river, seen the river, or imagined the river in a very long time.

Joining me today are Sumana Roy, and Parineeta Dandekar. Parineeta is a river researcher based in the US. She's an ecologist who finds herself moving towards understanding rivers and its 'Bhav-taal'. Sumana Roy is a poet, writer and a teacher who has given us some of the most lyrical insights into our forgotten lives. Her first book, *How I Became a Tree* is a 'love song on plants and trees' and introduces the idea of 'plant humanities' and how to live with 'tree time'. She is now working on water/rivers.

* Sumana Roy and Parineeta Dandekar, in conversation with Kishalay Bhattacharjee. Discussion held on 7 February 2020 at the IIC.

The idea of having these two persons talk about the river is about gaining perspectives on the river. In earlier episodes we travelled down Sahibi, the dead river of Delhi, Narmada, Adyar, Teesta, Tsangpo, Siang, Brahmaputra, Jamuna, Meghna, Padma, Ganga and the Yamuna.

Parineeta, let me start by asking what did you mean by ‘Bhav-taal’, and how did that shift happen and what happened with that shift?

Parineeta Dandekar

Thank you so much, Kishalay. Firstly, ‘Bhav-taal’ is not my word. I stumbled across it through the writings of Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay. He wrote *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*. However, his last book, his last novel, was *Ichhamoti*. *Ichhamoti* is a river in Bengal and flows through Bangladesh now. It was through his writings and a number of writings that I slowly realised that what we ecologists or what we activists try to talk about is that a river is not just a channel carrying water. It’s not just hydro power, it’s not just irrigation, it’s not just drinking water. It is so much more. It is about communities, it’s about forests, it’s about wetlands, and mountains and river bends, and also deserts at times. All of these manifestations are of the external ecology of the river, but also of the internal ecology.

This was very potent, and yet very subtle in Bibhuti Bhushan’s writings in *Ichhamoti*. That was a time when I thought that these spaces, forests or wetlands and rivers which connect all these landscapes, if these spaces are functioning, and healthy, and hence beautiful, then they affect the minds of people. It’s not only about health, of course, it is about health and well-being, but about well-being at very different levels. So, in *Ichhamoti*, it is a

very sceptical gentleman, a real gentleman who tries to understand his world and himself through the metaphor of a river. Here, the river is not only a metaphor, it's an actual flowing river that really struck me. One of the issues was that we keep talking about dams and pollution and hydropower, and dying rivers, and drying rivers. We write articles all the time about dying rivers. But it's not all about death, even now, even today. Just yesterday, I was at a free flowing river called Aghanashini, in Uttara Kannada, and it is yet about life, and beauty and understanding and meaning. That's how rivers connect us. I thought that we should not lose that in the cacophony of death and pollution and drying?

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

Sumana you grew up, and you live, as you say in a small Himalayan town. You grew up on the banks of the Teesta. So, you're a river person in many ways. Through some of Parineeta's writings, I realised that Bengal is home to a rich body of riverine literature we've kind of forgotten. How would you respond to Parineeta's idea of the river?

Sumana Roy

If you remember Kishalay, when you asked me to be on this panel, I insisted that I would like to be on a panel with Parineeta. It was because I think both of us speak from a similar vocabulary of intimacy and emotions. No matter what our disciplines, I think the language of statistics has been inimical to our understanding and experience of what we call the environment—that word has become a cliché that puts our brains to sleep. Whether in 'How I became a Tree', or in this piece of work that I'm working towards,

it's exactly this phrase that Parineeta used, 'Bhav-taal'. In fact, that was a phrase that was taken out from 'How I became a Tree' during the editing process.

I'm interested in the elements and the relationship between emotions and the elements. There is a reason, for instance, why we use the word 'elemental' for truth, for honesty. We call them non-human, and, in doing so, we create a hierarchy and binary between ourselves. I don't believe in these binaries at all. So when you say that there are 61 ways of naming different kinds of grass, just as there are multiple names for snow and ice in Iceland, naming is about giving value. We use proper names. A poet can say 'California' and evoke an entire ecosystem of emotions. She's Parineeta, and no one else is like her. By naming, we create value, we also create relationships, even these relationships we give names.

My interest in rivers is not in rivers alone, but also in water. I have realised that one of the reasons I chose not to live in Europe, for instance, was because I missed touching soil, touching water. I would often knead flour just to replicate that feeling, but it never substituted for the feeling of touching soil. My niece, when she was about four months old, was crying inconsolably. From a mix of helplessness and intuition, I took her to the basin and turned on the tap. I just took those little fingers and made her touch the water flowing from the tap. She stopped crying immediately. I think there is a relationship with the elements that has been forgotten, not only or not necessarily because of what we call our urban lives, but because we have chosen to forget or privilege other relationships over this.

What I will read or what I will like to talk about, is about remembering a vocabulary that once existed between ourselves and with other residents of this planet. What the Renaissance did, for instance, a legacy that embarrasses me and people like myself was to put man at the centre of the universe. I think that spoiled everything. In a Nandalal Bose painting, about a *choruibhati*, which translates to ‘picnic’, you have a canvas on which there is a river. You have these trees, and you see the trees moving because he was a master of showing motion and movement. You see the trees swaying in the wind. The humans are almost dots on the canvas. Here is a man who’s trying to make us remember that that is what man is—that he is not the centre of the universe, and not in the centre of the canvas. We have forgotten that. So whether through art or through other media, that’s one thing I would like—a vocabulary for these relationships to be created.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

We talked about the sensation and the touch of water, of river, of grass, of nature. Parineeta’s latest work is on Tagore. Earlier, she worked on Jibanananda Das. Now it’s a language that she does not understand. She discovered the riverine poetry and literature of Bengal through translations. She invokes *Rupasi Bangla*, ‘Along the world’s path, the scent of tender paddy, of kolmi water weeds, duck feathers, pond water, the subtle smells of Puntli fish and Chanda fish, a young girl’s moistened hands, wet from rinsing rice, that cold hand, the aromatic Mutha grass tread upon by a young boy.’

So even while you were talking about *Ichhamoti*, you talked about the way of life next to a river that is almost extinct. Is there a way to revive that, Parineeta?

Parineeta

I read Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, in which he's talking about climate change. He says that there will be a time in the future, when the impact of climate change will be so evident and so disastrous. At that time, the people will look back at what happened to this society, which was so immersed in expression, we all love to express that on whatever platforms we can get. How did we miss that? How did we miss understanding what was happening to our world, slowly but surely?

In that sense, like Sumana said, it's about remembering, and Ritwik Ghatak in one of the writings he's written, has talked about partitions and every time that he talks about partition, he talks about a river. River in his writings, and in his work, is a metaphor which connects and also divides. Most of the tales that he tries to tell are harrowing, they're not easy stories to understand. They are not light.

One of the films that he made was *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, and at the end, he says that we have to remember, no matter how difficult it is and how painful it is, we have to remember, because only if we remember what was beautiful, or what was sad, is there a chance of reviving it again. I find it very profound at many levels, and that's why I find the writings of people like Sumana especially, so important and so valuable. Because if we forget what it is to be like to be in connection with nature, with rivers or with forests and with wetlands, if we forget that, if that link is gone, then we can't revive it.

In river restoration, we have a lot of river front development projects in India these days, and many of them are called river restoration, or river rejuvenation projects. They're anything but river rejuvenation projects. However, what is river restoration? River restoration actually is going back to a baseline. In order to go back, we need to know the baseline. There are people and countries and groups who are trying to understand not how to revive the river, but how the river was maybe 60 years back, maybe 70 years back, maybe a river in your imagination, whatever it was, but how was it? Perhaps, once we remember, and once we hold these memories sacred, then we can return to them. We need to have a road to return to.

What is happening in today's writings, again, why I find Sumana so important is that in today's writings, we never find the beauty of these elements like she said. I was, I still am obsessed with Bangla riverine novels but I very firmly think that it is the Indian subcontinent which has this immense subtlety and complexity, about relationships with the river. In most of the other places you find reverence, or you find fear. Also love. In the Indian subcontinent, it's an extremely intimate relationship. For example, a boatman in Bengal loves the river, and he says, *Ganga Amar Maa, Podda Amar Maa*. However, he also says *Sarbanasha Podda Nadi*. He curses the river and he curses the river, like you will not curse a mother. I find that mother thing very problematic. Yet, he curses the river, he talks to the river like a friend.

That's something we can return to, if we remember it, not only through writings, which I think is a great repository, it's a living archive which keeps flowing, but also through the rivers today. Not all is lost in India. In every state and every region, there are places to cherish, to celebrate, to enjoy,

just to have a very joyful communion. Only a depressing discourse will not help, we need to keep those paths green, which we can walk back on again.

Sumana said something about naming. So, in that sense, river names are something which are very interesting. It's like the character. In most of the countries, what is this one characteristic of a river, if you are to say that this is a river. Then that one characteristic is something which is common in most of the river names. Rhine means to run. Olga is a form of running or walking. Ganga is Gam Gachhati. The common denominator in all this is **flow**. A river is flow, a river is not a body of water. It is not for nothing that in most of the rivers in the Indian subcontinent, everyone has a Ganga. Godavari is a Ganga, Kaveri is a Ganga, Ganga is a Ganga. It's a generic name, and that means to flow.

Sunil Gangopadhyay's story *Ek Nodir Golpo* is about a man trying to understand how a river was named. It goes back to some very interesting questions like who names a river, how is it even named? What comes together to name a river? If you look at the things which actually do come together to name a particular river, then it shows the various facets. We have a river called Kirtinasha. We have a river called Utavali. We have a river called Bhukhi, we have a river called Sukhi. We even have a river called Daayan. These Bhukhi, Sukhi and all these are, not so surprisingly, from Gujarat.

Even Bengal has some very peculiar river names. There's Pagla which flows like crazy. There's Mathabhanga, which is like head breaker. In Maharashtra, we have that Daatpadi, the river which will break your teeth, Urmodi which will break your body, these are the characteristics of rivers and they are so

connected with the reality. Our problem is we now want beauty, we want riverfront development, we want straight rivers and canals. Those are not rivers at all. We become a little poorer every time we convert a Pagla or a Mathabhanga into a straight Namami or whatever?

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

You just talked about the museum of memory, river as a museum of memory. I'll come back to it, but you have repeated a couple of times why Sumana's work is valuable and important.

Sumana

Parineeta, you've written about Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* as well, haven't you? That's my favourite piece of writing by you. That's how I came to your writing.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

Indeed such a lovely piece of writing.

Sumana

I think the Bengali word to respond to this, the Bengali word for relative is *atmiyo*. It comes from the word *atma*. So, I think we find our own relatives through our *atma*, not necessarily through blood, and you find them in space and time. Coming to someone like Parineeta's writing is to find an intellectual and emotional *atmiyo*. Just as I say, I found my *atmiyo* in these very young millennials sitting here— and I say this because they hate being called that—Suha and Tanita.

You mentioned naming—so what Jibanananda is doing (Jibanananda is impossibly difficult to translate, as you know) is that he is, like Tagore, creating Bangla as a modern language. There is no other artist or no other poet who has created poetic language almost singlehandedly in this way. We talk of Joyce's neologisms and portmanteau words. So many of Jibanananda's words, including the ones that you were reading from, Kishalay, are hyphenated words. He's trying to capture different sensations through one particular phrase or word, as it were. My temperament gravitates towards that kind of expression, a sensory language of closeness. So whether we talk about dams or beautification projects, or the word 'environment' for instance, or sticking posters on trees, saying 'save trees', it immediately becomes a moral science lesson. No one likes being in moral science class. I cannot stress this enough, but what we are trying to do, not just the two of us, but all of us actually, is to find a way of expressing our affection, of saying 'I love you' outside the cliché, as we do say, not necessarily in words, but through pinching someone's cheeks, stroking someone's hair, touching someone's hand. We create our own emotional vocabulary with the elements, with what we, in a very hierarchical manner, have dismissed as non-human.

For instance, when I look at older paintings of Delhi now, I find myself slightly embarrassed, that the first thing I look for is—it's a term I should not use here—a trace of Impressionism. It's not supposed to be there because I am, after all, looking at a 16th century or a company painting as it were. I find that I'm looking to check whether the air was as polluted as it is now, or do I see the same air as I do in Sonapat, or Delhi or Delhi airport? When I shower, why does the water smell of chlorine now? The taste of masoor

dal, papaya, and potatoes, for instance, is not the same. The seasons, time, their behaviour, our relationships with them, are stored in these fruits and vegetables and in the seasons, in the air, in the elements. As someone who has experienced extreme highs and extreme lows of happiness and sadness and joy and delight and pain, I think being with a relationship with the elements brings something to my life that I cannot exactly put in words. ‘The person who enters the forest isn’t the same person who leaves the forest’, after all. This is of course, about the change of the self that such a relationship creates. I saw my friend Nitin in the audience today. He takes people on visits to forests. I would like to hear from him about how such visits affect people.

I’m not a botanist. I cannot name these plants. However, it is possible to love a stranger and fall in love, even temporarily with a stranger at an airport or on a street. You’re just attracted to that person. You do not think of a history or a relationship with that person. Similarly, it is possible to have these relationships with those around us, the elements and plants and animals without being a scientist or a scholar. You think of a plant lover, and immediately your assessment of that person is scientific. How much does this person know about plants? How much do you know of love? How much do you know about humans that you fall in love and break your heart over and over again? So, what I’m requesting for is a return to a relationship and a vocabulary that reflects a relationship of emotions.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

Parineeta, when you said that it’s possible to revive the path with memory, you have questioned in one of your pieces, ‘how can we save something

that we haven't experienced?' I think you are talking about *Ichhamoti*. Also tell us, how did you get involved and interested in a language that you didn't understand?

Parineeta

I will just really quickly respond to what Sumana said. She's actually giving words to something that was half baked in my mind for some time, and it's very moving for me. So what are the things that rivers or these systems teach us or teach me because I again, find that 'us' thing very problematic. We have always heard the term dharma. Then there is Nadi-Dharma. What is a Nadi-Dharma? Nadi-Dharma is how a river originates, at a hilly place, cuts when she's young. It will sound like a cliched personification; but when we look at the parallels, they're really very beautiful, we should not overlook them. When she is born in the mountains, she is very, and I can't say 'it', she is very immature and she cuts through the strata and it's a very sharp current. Then when the baggage of memories become heavier and heavier, the rivers spread. You have the middle course of the river, which is a satiated middle course. Then, when everything becomes a bit heavy, like a wise old woman, she spreads and gives out the gifts of silt, which is her memory. These are not just metaphors. For example, the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta, which is the biggest, largest delta in the world has the highest silt load, it brings the most amount of silt to the Delta, it keeps building the Delta, year after year, day after day. All that silt, where does it come from? Most of that silt actually comes from the Himalayas. When the river deposits a baggage at the Delta, the bag of memory actually comes from her childhood and that is what is getting deposited there.

It takes time. One of my biggest philosophical guides is Winnie the Pooh. Winnie the Pooh says that the river knows it. There will always be time. I find that very important for me as I rush and stumble through life, and want to rush things which cannot be rushed. At this point of time, when I have all dammed rivers around me, when I write only about dams, when there is drilling and blasting going on, it does affect me. I'm not somewhere separate from it and that's why *Ichhamoti* again comes back to me, because in *Ichhamoti*, each of the characters whether it is Bhavani who is full of Vatsalyaras or others. He's the sceptic. He doesn't know what to do in his life. He's lost. The stronger protagonists, protagonist is a very cliched word but the real characters of the novel are women who shine their brightest when they're on the riverbanks. Each of them finds their own truths by the river, when the river is flowing, when the river is flooded, when the river is full, when the river is drying, but in all the moods, these people actually find themselves and their reflections.

For me, that was a revelation. I always wondered that these are moments of epiphany, they're a gift of grace, these epiphanies. I don't live by a good river. My Mula-Mutha in Pune, it's one of the most polluted rivers in the entire country. Would I have been a wiser, saner, kinder person, if my river was healthy, and flowing? I think that is a question, and till the time we accept that this is the reality, unless we understand all these facets of how the elements mould us and how we mould the elements all the time, then possibly we can try to correct our blasphemies over the years.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

At Arteast Festival from where the idea of this dialogue emerged, there was a section which Sumana had curated, in which there were poems from the six different stages of the Brahmaputra starting from the Tsangpo. She, however wrote that there are seven stages to the river. While I was reading the curatorial note, I was wondering, where did she discover the seventh river that I did not know about, and she said that the seventh is water! We often forget that it's water, the flow as you mentioned, the flow and the water, these are characteristics, but these are very important characteristics that we forget the river has. We think about our own characteristics, we forget that the river also has a soul, a heart. I don't know how many of you have actually gone underwater to see that there is a world beneath the river just like there is a world beneath the sea, the world beneath the sea is far more colourful, perhaps than the one below the river but below the river, there is a different, absolutely incredibly beautiful planet that exists, that does not care about what's happening to, for example, the Citizenship Act, or any other thing affecting the land. Just like the land people, we don't care about water, the water people also are indifferent in a sense.

What is your relationship to water Sumana?

Sumana

This is an excerpt from something that, in my head is called 'Elemental', where I'm looking at my relationship as a representative of the human, my relationship with the elements. What I'm reading today is my relationship with water, or my relationship with sadness as navigated by water.

It must owe to the prescience of idioms and metaphors that the most common—and universal—simile for freedom comes from the animal world and not the elements: as free as a bird, not as free as light or water or even air. I stand by the window thinking this—these thoughts come because the elements can't, for thoughts move more freely than the elements. It is evening, and darkness has chained light to a few places, almost arbitrarily, and yet not quite: to the electric pole, where it cannot seem to move beyond its penumbra, as if light were a dog on a leash, to neon-lit rooms that look like pimples of light on the giant dark face of this neighbourhood, and to cell phones, where light seems glued to the screens like a face-mask. Hence the wisdom of the ancients—for even though light might be the speediest, it is not completely free. Air, too, is regimented—when a vacuum flask leaks and air rushes in, it seems like air is on parole, so delightful is the sound of its freedom.

But water? I can hear the rain as I write this—tapping on streets, lashing at leaves, arguing with glass, beating against it, like a lawyer slapping a table. Tyres, fat and thin, of automobiles and bikes, slice the wet streets momentarily—they become Moses parting the sea. I listen to that sound with slight trepidation—it is as if someone were running a knife through water. That fear is as fleeting as this sound, but another will take its place soon, for such is the nature of fear—to never vacate a space it's entered, returning to it in various forms and guises. I know when the rain stops—no, not from the sound of drying, for though we can hear things getting wet, we cannot hear them drying, unless it's water dancing on fire, the bubbles complaining of heat, and dying soon after. I know from the sound of its leftovers—the stickiness of water-drops, their reluctance to leave their temporary inns of

eaves and leaves, the sigh of a thud with which they fall to the ground. And I wonder—is water free? How can it be, when it has no control over when it wants to leave, or whether it wants to leave at all?

Humans are not free, and neither are the living and non-living. We have no control over our entries and exits from life—how could we be free? And yet to long for it, to hanker for it, to desire something that we've not experienced in its entirety drives so much of our actions. It rains fiercely as these thoughts eddy inside me. The movement of both is different—in direction and in shape. I keep thinking which of them is freer, unmindful of the awkwardness and unjustifiability of the comparison. They say 'it's pouring' when it rains like this—to say that is to take the presence of the 'pourer' as a given, as one imagines a hand pouring water from a jug into a glass. It is possible that this 'pourer' controls the freedom of water. But when I go outside, to check, even though I already know, there is no hand to see.

What I see instead are decapitated bodies of water, resembling strings, falling endlessly. A word related to freedom falls gently into my consciousness—attachment; and soon after, the other half of the pair follows—detachment. The raindrops show no attachment to the sky, which I imagine they're evacuating. But they exhibit no detachment either—their obedience to gravity doesn't leave them free. It is as if all water must return to earth.

The moment of the raindrop hitting the earth is a moment of rebellion, however tiny it might be. It is small in scale but not in scope. The raindrop lands on soil or concrete or water or tree—it is possibly hurt, as all falling things are, slapped for their audaciousness by gravity. But its energy for

freedom, which I imagine was a trigger for it leaving the sky, isn't gone, in spite of the long journey—it rebels, it tries to unshackle itself of the grasp of gravity, the soaking sponginess and clinginess of soil. And hence the centrifugal movement of the water-drop, it kicking the earth, like a child throwing a tantrum.

I want to record this movement—it reminds me of the march-past of soldiers, of their feet moving up, as if pushed by gravity, and dust mimicking that motion, rising rebelliously. The camera fails, and soon I'm sitting on the floor with a pencil in hand. I'm no artist—I can't even draw grass—but something inexplicable has left me with the desire to record water's urge for freedom. I soon discover that, of all things, water is the hardest to draw. I return to words, to letters, my old habitat. The words come out of me, not any less instinctive than rain: freedom, flowing, falling... I don't fail to notice that these words begin with 'f', and that freedom somehow seems related to unrestricted movement, to flowing and falling. If that be true, water, when it lives as rain, must be free.

Soon the unpredictable passion of tropical rain has given way to a nagging drizzle, its sound as mechanical as a carpenter's hammering, but only without a man's need to rest. It seems that water now has less freedom. I soon realise that it is my conditioning in the bureaucracy of sounds that leads me to such odd deductions—to be able to gauge freedom from sound is a risky indulgence. For it is easy to think of the chorus as unfree or a singer singing to tune as having no freedom, in the same way it is easy to imagine death as offering more freedom than life. Do we imagine freedom as liquid and its opposite as solid, then?

I will go to the Teesta, I decide, there where water can no longer flow to its will. I've decided that water must have will, that it has a desire too, no less than I do. Why else would it be restless in one state, why else would it desire other lives, and move between ice and gas and liquid? When I become conscious of the movement of my thoughts, I cannot imagine them as anything else but like water. Are they free, my thoughts? Only as free as water. The rest of my thoughts coagulate and cause bad traffic. All roads and streets and alleys are blocked; a lonely thought flows in, as if through a drain. That awareness makes me think of the passageways of water, of how every space should be available to water but actually isn't, so that water's claim on land seems illegitimate, even cruel, as during floods. I think of the mop and the near-permanent wet rag, wiping water where it's not supposed to be.

Later, as evening condenses into night, taking light and sound away from it, as if they were the day's squatters, and the sound of aloneness becomes as strong as the jhi-jhi-jhi hum of crickets in forests, I hear a drop of water drip from a tap. I'm in bed, in a town which has, like all urban spaces, been robbed of the fraternal darkness of night—the salt and sugar of day and night leak into each other, but the rules are different for water. Water mustn't move at night, except when the sky is shedding its water-fur. Trapped inside thin pipes, forced by the plumber to move only in one direction, I imagine water's body bruised and scratched as mine would be from being forced to crouch inside a suffocating bunker. It must be this asphyxiation that causes them to pant when the tap is opened—that gushing sound of the return to breath, like a woman released from a corset. It is at such moments, like this

one, triggered by a tap's rebellious drop, that I return, again, to thoughts about freedom.

I think about the cruel irony of nomenclature, that water that is kneaded by pipes to eventually spurt out of a tap should be called 'running water'. It is no different from putting a cheetah inside a cage in a zoo and calling it the fastest animal in the world. This recalls its visual opposite—the still skin of a pond, unmoving and temporarily indifferent to the pulse of its neighbours. Is it freer than the water trapped inside a pipe? My mind, never still, gravitates towards comparisons, towards metaphors and similes, as if the similarity of experience between the comparatives would bring me some wisdom and calm. As this happens, I wonder about water's comparative instinct as well—its restlessness, for why would it move between states with such ease? I think about which form water is freest in, and as these thoughts accumulate, the image of a saree on a windy day moves through my mind. It is hanging from a clothes-wire—it is moving wherever it wants to. That it is not the saree which is moving of its own will but the wind which is making it move comes to me much later. It is strange that when I think of the saree in folds—in pleats, when worn, or folded, when sleeping inside a wardrobe—I think of it as less free. I feel the same way about water—in both cases I realise that it is space or its lack that defines my understanding of freedom. Out of nowhere anger arrives, the way it does at night sometimes, like a rusty gun. And I find myself standing in front of the kitchen sink, kneading water, squeezing it through my fingers.

I think I've run out of time, I'll stop here.

Parineeta

I can hardly respond to this. The most important things that hit me was what you talked about, the silence and the sounds. Then your relationship with the Teesta. So it all came together. Because when one of my friends went to the Teesta basin, he said that it is very beautiful. Emerald dam waters, that emerald, they're very beautiful. But there's something wrong there. I said, what's wrong? I didn't want to talk about dams and stuff. So he said, it's beautiful but there's no sound. You can't hear the river. It's like the silenced rivers. I always think of rivers and water as freedom. So it was fantastic. Thanks a lot. Thank you.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

I am going to open this up but before that I must thank such a large audience that sat through a conversation, not on identity, not on citizenship, not on more important political things, issues that govern us, that impact us, but also, this intangible thing which actually has much bigger impact, which probably we sometimes ignore. We forget that these sensory experiences are what makes us who we are.

Audience

I'm from O. P. Jindal University, and I'm studying global affairs. I'm in first year, and I love writing poetry. My name is Ishita Dutta. I wrote a poem recently on the river. I was born in Delhi, I've been here since I was born and I haven't seen a river. First time I saw a river was when I was 19 years old. Therefore, I know what I'm lacking after listening to you even more, I feel it more now. My question would be, how were you raised? I want to

know about your initial life. What do you think was the impact of a river in creating this life? What do you think children are missing out on? How can we change that? That's my question to you.

Parineeta

I was born in Nasik, which is on the banks of the Ganga. We always say Ganga. My grandmother always said, Ganga. I was nearly 10 years old when I realised that the Ganga is actually the Godavari. One of the best things that I remember about the river was a vegetable market, with cows sitting everywhere, and people selling all sorts of colourful, beautiful things. A very filthy, filthy beautiful river. That's the sort of dichotomy, which has always been with me, but just about 30 kilometres upstream from Nasik city is where the river originates, Tryambakeshwar.

As a child I used to roam around and my parents didn't ever know where I was. Generally I was on the riverbanks. I find it very interesting that, when you become as old as me, nearly 40, you don't know what your memories are actually; if that was true, if I really saw a lotus pond there, or was it my memory of seeing the lotus pond there. The river of my memory is very beautiful and riverine towns have the speciality that everything is associated with rivers, everything, markets, temples, main street of the village, of the city, everything, you come to the river.

I think my father has steered most of my life, though he was with me for a very short time, and he loved rivers and I carry it forward. It's very simple and cliched but I think that's the truth for me.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

I didn't grow up near any rivers. I grew up in the hills.

Sumana

I grew up in a small town called Siliguri. A river called Mahananda, not the Mahanadi, mind you, runs through this town. It's no longer called Mahananda. It's called Maha-ganda. That tells you the entire history of this town. Civilisations were raised on the banks of rivers, we know this historically. Both of us were talking about how we seemed to have forgotten these things. If civilisations were raised—I don't like the word civilisation—you know what damage it has done; I'm using it as a metaphor. No one thinks that you're going to breathe more air than you need. Your parents don't warn you about air. However, they warn you about water, you don't know how to swim, you're always reminded that you're a land animal in their instructions. Similarly, we were not allowed to go near the river, except on this very American understanding of what constitutes a picnic, the American understanding of nature as a weekend activity—like you go for a Friday movie, you go to experience nature during a weekend.

During the winter, we were often taken to the Teesta. I might be partial to it, as people say one is to one's blood, but I would say as one is to one's water. We are more constituted by water than we are by blood. We would be taken to the Teesta from time to time during the winter. The picnic spot would be a place called Kalijhora, which is where the dam is now. So, it's not just me who's emotionally related to the river. When we go to Sikkim, the river follows you almost like the moon, and I sometimes find my mother wiping

her tears. She's not a person who's extremely conscious of a relationship with the elements in the way, she's not a hypersensitive person like me.

Was I raised by a river? You say you didn't see the river? Have you been to America? But you've been raised by America in many ways? Yes. So without knowing it, you have been raised by a river. Kishalay said something that might not have gone down very well, because it seemed to be politically incorrect, about protest movements. I just wish and request that all the energy that we are putting into these protests about these inhuman laws that are dividing us, even if we put one-tenth of our energy into protests against governments all over the world, how they are destroying the world, I think it might come to something. The fact that the environment, for lack of a better word, is not on the agenda of most of these political parties; I heard that it was in the manifesto of the Congress Party, but almost like the way mutual fund risks are narrated on television or on radio FM.

The environment ministry exists only to destroy forests. We should have a ministry for better air in a place such as this one. So, these too are things I think we need to militate against.

Audience

This took me back to about 20 years ago in my own life. I was as sensitive and as connected to elements and the kind of thoughts that you are all resonating but the travails of life, somewhere, it doesn't give you the time to sit back and relook and read, write also, there was a phase I used to write also. Thank you, you took me back. I am Sudha Sachdeva. I teach at Lady Irwin College but till about 20 years ago, I was very active with one kind

of... somehow life takes you to so many other things that if you want to get back, you don't. Thank you for bringing me back, that little space in my brain. It's somewhere... and gave me that courage that I will get back to... somehow and somehow reconnect with you and reconnect with the elements and reconnect with my own inner self.

Audience

Good evening, everyone. I'm Anushka from O.P. Jindal Global University. I want to thank all of you for such an emotional kind of dialogue about rivers. So my question to you is, I think that a river doesn't die. I'm trying to see the similarity between a soul and a river; just like a soul, a river originates, goes throughout its course, goes through a lot of obstacles. It is exploited. It provides for human beings, trees, animals in every way but in the end, it either meets the sea or becomes... so just like the human soul, it originates, it faces a lot of obstacles throughout its course. It always gives something to nature, human beings, plants, animals, but in the end, I feel it doesn't die. It either meets the sea, or it evaporates, but it doesn't die. Do you think that it's similar to the human soul or soul which becomes the part of the universe in the end? How could you actually tell people to see elements as a part of their soul? Because everything is connected, everything has soul in it? So this is my question to you, anybody can answer that.

Audience

Can I add to this? So very, very short. Hinduism or Hindu mythology, says that the soul does not die. But I think this is what is making our rivers die. We think we have all the time in the world, we think it's going to come back.

I think this is what is making it dead. We humans think that we can destroy it as much as we want, it's going to come back. So that's what I think.

Parineeta

Well, I'm not very good in this soul thing. Pretty bad at this soul business. However, I want to say one thing for sure. One of the most moving things that I saw was that the Colorado is a river shared between the United States and Mexico. The United States with all its might, and immense ruthlessness completely dries out the Colorado by the time it meets Mexico. It goes in to Mexico. The Colorado Delta has not seen water for more than two decades now. So when you look at the Colorado Delta, as a satellite image, or as a photograph, you can actually see the picture of water, which has dried out. A dried picture of water on the soil. You can see that.

Just some years back, the country decided that they need to do something and they need to release some flow to go to the Delta. It was called minute 316. They released something from the dam in the United States just across the border, and the water gushed in. This has happened twice, two times in the past more than 20 years, that the Delta has actually seen water. But what happened when the water was released the first time. Cottonwoods, willows, the seeds sprouted, minnows, the kind of fish which are in the river, the eggs were found.

I have a picture, it's always on my computer, it's of a small child who sees the river for the first time when it actually comes to her. She recognises the river, she knows what it is, though she's never seen the river flow in her town. The way the Colorado responded to that, just one flow was phenomenal.

You see it everywhere. You see a quarry, a stone quarry, and you leave that quarry for two seasons. In the third season, there are water lilies there. Birds come, there are rushes, there are sedges. Life is interesting. Life is built on hope which really does not have a lot of proof to substantiate it but still things and life risks something and things emerge.

I personally think and there are two ways to look at it, but river restoration and overall reviving rivers is a very easy task because rivers want to be revived. They respond, they do spring up to life. Nothing really encapsulates the circle of life as a river. There are atmospheric rivers. So Ganga is called *Tripathaga*. *Tripathaga*—is it is flowing in three spheres? So one is the heaven, the earth and the Paatal, but actually it's the atmospheric river, the surface water and the groundwater, and that is a cycle which goes on. It never dies, not even a river which goes into the desert never dies. It's *Dharashayi*, it evaporates. If you know rivers in Gujarat, which disappear into the Rann, when there is rain, it is a magical landscape. It changes, the colours change, there are wild asses which come from God knows where. There are plants and there are lilies there. It's like someone changes it. Those rivers don't go to the sea. I always think that a river is also more than water. There are palaeochannels of rivers, which are old channels of several rivers, where water has not flowed but it is still a river, and the river still knows its way. When there are floods in Bihar, these are the palaeochannels which get back to life. So life is funny, keeps coming back.

Sumana

I don't know about the nature of souls. I don't remember my past life. But I think, let's take the example, I'll use an example from or a metaphor

from plant life. You have peas, they lose their water, and you can preserve them. Then again, to bring them back to life. you soak them in water. So it's like a cycle. Rivers might disappear but they don't disappear like that. The disappearance of water from rivers does not mean the death of a river. That's what Parineeta has been trying to say. I'm also thinking of Sarnath Banerjee's new graphic novel which looks at the water mafia scene in Delhi. I think it's a brilliant intellectual conceit—that he compares this water mafia's underground search for water with this government's search for the river Saraswati.

Audience

My name is Manoj Mishra. I'm very happy that I came here. I'm a great fan of Parineeta. I have heard of Sumana but for the first time I am listening to her.

I have a question for Sumana. There is a Bengali, there is a Maharashtrian and these are two people who take lot of time in naming their kids. They search this and that, make a list of various names and then they name. Now Sumana, my question is, is it the name that makes the personality or vice versa? And it also applies to rivers.

Parineeta, one of my hobbies is map reading. I really love to search for small, small streams. What has fascinated me most through the map reading process is how do rivers meet. It's like a courtship. They are trying to assess one another before they actually meet. There is no straight meeting. Especially if a small river is meeting a big river, then it is very, very cautious. Similarly when the big river is about to meet the sea, again it is very, very

cautious. It breaks into several and then it meets. How do you explain this?

Parineeta

First of all, thank you so much Manoj ji for coming here. Manoj ji, he's playing it down, but he's a stalwart when it comes to actually saving rivers and raising very pertinent, important and inconvenient questions. I'm very grateful that you're here.

About Sangam, it's very interesting and so many people have said it, including Tagore, that in India, we don't only have beautiful natural places like mountains and river origins and Sangams, either the Sangams of two rivers or of the river and the sea. All of these places are sacred. They have divinity linked to them in some ways. Kaka Kalelkar in *Jeevan Leela*, had said something very beautiful about Sangam, he had said that when two rivers meet, why is a Sangam sacred? It's not just two rivers meeting, it is two ways of life meeting and coming together. And it is actually that. Two rivers which bring with them the colours of their region, of their people and when they come together, they're bringing those people together. That's why Sangam, Prayag are so important. This is true, culturally as well as ecologically. You find riverine dolphins, always at river confluences. You find most diversity always at confluences of two rivers, or the biggest and the most beautiful confluence, which is when the river meets the sea, the estuary, which has the largest biodiversity for any ecosystem. Why does that happen? Because mixing is beautiful. When two different things mix, possibly hesitant at first, but when they mix and when they come together, that's where life happens. That's why in many places, Seema wadi, that is

the village which is on the border of two places always gets a lot of respect. Because that is where two cultures, two communities, two ways of life, two ways of knowing and loving actually meet together. That's why Sangam.

What you said is the most famous Sangam, one of the most famous Sangams is the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile at Khartoum, and it's not for nothing that it is called the longest kiss on the earth, where the blue and white flow very hesitantly. The White Nile is a longer river, but the blue is very tempestuous. She's a small river, but she's very spirited. So though White has so much of load, when Blue Nile comes with all its force, White Nile actually stops and goes back for a while. And then the Blue flows through.

Or the confluence of Rio Negro and the Amazon wherein two colours meet. Or where I was just a week back is Aghanashini, where a very silted channel meets a very clear stream. And you can see for kilometres, that the waters are trying to wrestle with each other, but then they mix and then they go ahead. So I find confluences of all things, maybe rivers, rivers and the sea, rivers and wetlands, rivers and deserts or rivers and people or people and people, confluences are very special.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

I think on this note, I have to wrap up. This has been a wonderful confluence. I'll give both of you the last words to say, but questions I may not be able to take anymore because we've run right out of time.

Sumana

He asked a very beautiful question. I really want to respond to that.

Sumana

Thank you for that question. And for such a lovely response. Also Parineeta would remember the Rangit meeting the Teesta. And also, this being celebrated in names. For instance, the ‘Trisrota’, three srots—streams—coming together near the Kurseong hills.

This is a philosophical question about naming, but because you asked me to locate it, particularly in Bengali culture, I’ll use that as an alibi because it’s a difficult question. There is a Tagore poem called ‘Ami’ where he says ‘Amari Chetonor ronge....’

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

‘Amari Chetonar Ronge Panna Holo Shobuj, Chuni Uthlo Ranga Hoye, Ami Chokh Mellum Akashe, Jole Uthlo Alo, Pube Poshchime....’

Sumana

Thank you, Kishalay. So it’s my consciousness that is creating these colours. The fact that everything is mediated through me. In a short story called ‘Abhagi Swargo’ by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Abhagi, as you can make out from the name is someone who is unlucky, considers herself unlucky and leaves what we would understand traditionally as a very unfortunate life, because of this name that has been given to her. Yes, there is a power in naming. Names hurt. When the home minister of a country calls so-called

refugees or immigrants, rats, for instance, as he has done, or termites, it's not a coincidence that these are animals of the soil. In Nepal, the topi stands for a certain kind of culture, the dhoti, for Indians who have migrated and become working populations in Nepal now.

Naming not only in terms of proper nouns, but also in terms of relationship to something. Because we're talking about rivers, I have felt that it cannot be a coincidence that in a riverine culture like ours, so many women have names that come from rivers, the Teesta ...

And this I go back to because it's supposed to be a closing remark, Kishalay, when you organised this conference on rivers, it was about the six stages of the Brahmaputra, which I, taking after Shakespeare, called the seven ages of man, and hence the seven names. It's significant that at different stages of the river, the people living by it give it a different name. It is a name for me, it is a name of a relationship. I have been married for 19 years, and I have known my husband for 26 years now, and at different stages, I have called him by different names. These have happened gradually, without affidavits as you would understand. So I think our relationships change, our relationships with rivers change as well.

Kishalay Bhattacharjee

To end the conversation today I will read out from an essay by Parineeta on Jibanananda Das.

“Can we say that poems like his are only about nostalgia, aesthetics and word play? Perhaps, the way he evokes the communion of man, rivers, paddy fields and kash grass, dew laden forests and green iridescent beetles:

it lays down a map to an old journey. Perhaps river revival is not only about letters and submissions. It is also about poems and stories. It is not only about winners and losers, but also about a longing for solitary walks along a green river bank: reminding us of a place that was and a place that could be.

At a time when we, as a nation, are replacing poems with paeans and fragile love with sticky devotion, writings which celebrate the land and the rivers for precisely what they are seem invaluable.

If we are willing to listen, poetry of poets like Jibanananda is a placeholder of the past and also of a future.

*Once again I'll come, smitten by Bengal's rivers, fields, to this
Green and kindly land of Bengal, moistened by the waves of the Jalangi."*

Thank you so much everyone for coming. I hope we remain connected through rivers and meet at Sangams.

About the Author

Kishalay Bhattacharjee is a journalist and author. He is the executive dean of the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication and director, New Imaginations.

Sumana Roy is the author of *How I Became a Tree*, a work of nonfiction, *Missing: A Novel*, *Out of Syllabus: Poems*, and *My Mother's Lover and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories.

Parineeta Dandekar is Associate Coordinator, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People and writes on rivers in literature.



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