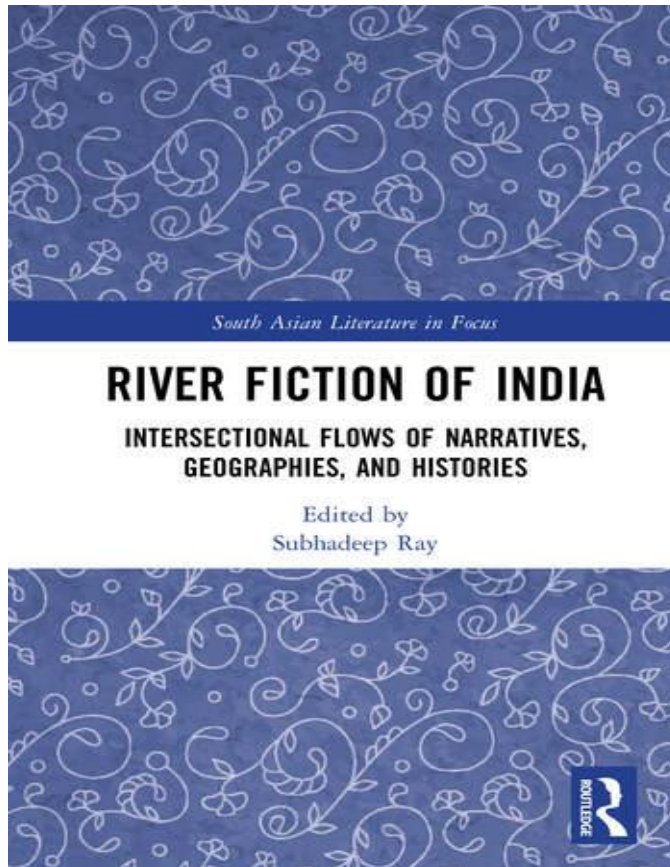


Subhadeep Ray (ed.), *River Fiction of India: Intersectional Flows of Narratives, Geographies, and Histories*, London and New York: Routledge, 2025, i-xxii+1-283 pp. ISBN: 978-1-041-11495-6 (hbk) and 978-1-003-59818-3 (ebk).



Discussion of land-based narratives dominated the academic field of Ecocriticism until the emergence of ‘Blue Humanities’ as a distinct discipline in the twenty-first century. Steven Mentz coined the term in 2009, and critics such as Dan Brayton (*Shakespeare’s Ocean*, 2012) and Sidney I. Dobrin (*Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*, 2021) identified an ‘ocean deficit disorder’ in the corpus of critical literature. Despite the recent interest in the oceanic spaces, the other prominent aquatic space – the rivers – has not received much attention. The book under review addresses this ‘deficiency disorder’ in a comprehensive manner and attempts to establish the ‘river fiction’ as a robust literary genre.

Published in the South Asian Literature in Focus series, the volume, as its title suggests, is exclusively based on studies of Indian literary works written in both regional languages and English. In his Foreword, Banibrata Mahanta explains the role river plays in World and Indian literature. In India, he observes, the literary representation of rivers “ranges from the symbolic to the real and from the mystical to the mundane” (xviii). In her Afterword, Anita Agnihotri, herself the author of a river trilogy, critically discusses how she was profoundly influenced by iconic Bengali river fictions such as Tagore’s *Noukadubi* (Boatwreck, 1906), Manik Bandyopadhyay’s *Padma Nadir Majhi* (The Boatman of Padma, 1936), Adwaita Mallabharman’s *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called Titas, 1957), and Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay’s *Ichhamati* (The River Ichhamati, 1959). Subhadeep Ray’s theoretically informed Introduction argues that river fiction is a “highly composite genre” that traverses time and space (7). The articles on river fictions in the volume, he explains, map “cognitive and emotional geographies of India across centuries” (2). Ray emphasises late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian authors’ awareness of the overwhelming impact of technology on ecology, the invasive intrusion of capitalism, and their modernist sensibilities. Rivers are not merely an inert background – they permeate the lives and spirits of the characters and communities.

The seventeen essays in the volume are divided into three sections: Narratives, Geographies, and Histories. The articles in the first section highlights the rivers’ associations with “various social factors, like gender, age, health, religion, class, occupation, etc.” (13). The second section emphasises the overtly place-based fictions and the role of “critical regionalism” (17), while the third focuses on the historical drifts represented in narratives. The articles are so intersectional that issues and concerns often overlap, making it difficult to categorise them under fixed headings.

The six essays in the Narratives section explore the dual nature of the river as both a “feeder and killer” (48). In the opening essay, Dhurjjati Sarma insightfully analyses Rudrani Sarma’s 2017 fiction *Kabibunor Malita* (Ballad of the Kans Grass, 2017). The novel examines how a section of people depends on the river Brahmaputra for their livelihood and how they are threatened and displaced by it. Rudrani Sarma depicts the precarity of the Muslim community of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) origin living on the river *chars* which are vulnerable to annual floods. They collect fertile alluvial soil which helps their resettlement. The article highlights the novel’s contemporary relevance by analysing their vulnerability to statelessness and citizenship issue as well as their struggle for resistance. Supriti Debnath’s article shifts focus to the rivers in Bengal as represented in select short stories of Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, Balaichand

Mukhopadhyay, and Jagadish Gupta. She demonstrates how the rivers in the novels influence complex human relationships and mediates the ethical attachments among riverine people. Debnath also notes in these works the interplay between Bengali modernism and traditionalism.

The context of Bengali modernism is also explored by Pritha Chakraborty who studies Manik Bandyopadhyay's *The Boatman of the Padma* and Samaresh Bose's *The Ganga* (The River Ganga, 1965). This time, however, the main focus is on the relationship between humans and non-humans, the dual role of the river as protector and destroyer, and the role capitalism and feral biopolitics play in the destruction of ecosystem people and non-human species. Subhasnata Mohanta analyses Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay's novels *Hansulibaker Upakatha* (The Tale of Hansuli Turn, 1951) and *Kalindi* (The River Kalindi, 1940) to explore the representation of socio-economic stratification and the conflict between omnivores and ecosystem people. Prama Bhattacharjee's contribution looks at Atin Bandyopadhyay's 1998 novel *Ekta Joler Rekha O Ora Tin Jon* (A Thin Line of Water and the Three of Them, 1998) from the perspective of performative masculine identity. The three village boys perform the masculine act of catching a big fish in the Meghna but ultimately release it back into the river. Ivana Chowdhury shifts focus to thrillers and analyses Satyajit Ray's *Joy Baba Felunath* (Cheers to Baba Felunath, 1976) and *Golapi Mukta Rahasya* (The Mystery of the Pink Pearl, 1989). Chowdhury brings out the irony of how Benaras, a religious site for Hindus situated on the Ganga, becomes a haven for crime. The river here colludes with the built city space to promote greed and materialism.

The second section begins with Nilanjana Chatterjee's interesting article on "river rites and river resilience" in Eastarine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Spirit Nights* (2022) and *Sky Is My Father* (2018) written in English. This article offers an important examination of how rivers, as integral parts of Nature, have inspired ancient Naga myths, rites, and rituals. Partha Sarathi Nandi analyses Prafulla Roy's *Char* (The Island in the River, 2002) and Annada Sankar Ray's *Angina Bidesh* (Dividing the Water, 1976) to revisit the Partition of India and the Radcliffe Line which made rivers part of cartographical exercises. The border creation and maintenance reduced communities such as the Choruas to destitution and often statelessness. Somasree Sarkar explores Anita Agnihotri's novels *Mahanadi: The Tale of a River* (2021) and *Mahakantar* (The Great Forest, 2021) to foreground "riverine commons' micro-narratives" (143) of distress and precarity resulting from capitalist, state-supported developmental projects such as construction of mega-dams and neoextractivist initiatives. Tanushree Ghosh studies graphic fictions such as Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (2022) and Sarnath

Banerjee's *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (2015), demonstrating how global capitalism and postcolonial developmentalism reduce rivers "into a machine and a source of raw material" and used it "for commodity production and profit maximization" (162). The final article by Khamsa Qasim explores Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) to analyse "how, by portraying the river as a narrative agency, Roy re-defines nature/culture, human/non-human binaries and their mutual co-defining relationships to develop a composite geography" (168). This article too explores "connection between the big projects and small lives" (178).

Section III opens with Pritam Mukherjee's article "Mapping the Unknown" which analyses Major James Rennell's river surveys (1764–67) to demonstrate how they represent colonial strategies to penetrate uncharted, untamed territories of "the riverine system of a region as important as Bengal" and build up a colonial knowledge system for governance (187). Nabanita Biswas analyses Nalini Bera's *Subarnarenu Subarnarekha* (The Gold Dust of the Subarnarekha, 2018) set against the backdrop of the Subarnarekha basin. She illustrates how Bera portrays the invasive forces of capitalism that assault the cultural foundations of indigenous communities and destroys the history and ecology of the region. Sanjukta Naskar reads Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's *Ichhamati* which goes beyond "building a partially mnemonic longing, and gathers within its ambit the entire unfolding of a life along the banks of the titular river" (213). Manisha Bhattacharya interprets Adwaita Mallabarman's *Titas Ekli Nadir Naam* and Harishankar Jaladas' *Jalaputra* (The Son of the Water, 2014). She argues that the former posits the fishing community "in its pre-capitalist state" and the latter depicts "neo-liberal subjects entangled in a corporate-capitalist economy and hierarchical bureaucracy" (222). Indra Sankar Ghatak explores Debesh Ray's Tista novels *Muffasali Brittanta* (Suburban Narrative, 1980), *Tristaparar Brittanta*, (Chronicles from the Banks of the River Tista, 1988) and *Tistapuram* (Tales of the River Tista, 2000) from Marxist perspectives. He argues that Ray's river novels represent the "struggle between the formidable authority of the state and its marginalised inhabitants – the various ethnic communities of the Rajbanshis, Bhatias, Charuas, and Madeshias" (237). The section concludes with Rakhi N. P. and Sheena John's "Ravaged Hinterlands of Central India," which explores Anita Agnihotri's *Mahanadi: The Tale of a River* from ecocritical perspectives. The novel explores the impact of the construction of Hirakud dam on the region's tribal communities. Drawing on Jason W. Moore's and Raj Patel's concepts of seven "cheap" things – nature, money, labour, care, food, energy, and lives – outlined in *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2017), the authors examine Agnihotri's novel to reveal the relationship between the relentless flow of capital and the exploitation of marginalised communities in the era of the Capitalocene.

All the articles in this volume are theoretically informed and written with academic rigour. However, a review of the texts analysed reveals that the book primarily focuses on Bengali fictions with most of the rivers covered being located in Eastern India. To achieve a truly pan-Indian character, the volume should have included textual representations from other regions of the country as well. Despite this limitation, it must be acknowledged that the volume makes a fresh beginning by effectively introducing Indian river fictions to English-knowing global readers.

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