The River as Witness and Wound: Reimagining Riverine Entanglements in Anita Agnihotri's *Mahanadi*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Anita Agnihotri's *Mahanadi: The Tale of a River* (2021) reconceptualizes riverine agency through the framework of the Blue Humanities. It argues that the novel positions the Mahanadi not as landscape but as a sentient protagonist whose shifting states reflect the complex and often unequal relationships between human and nonhuman worlds. Through its polyphonic form and interlinked stories, the novel highlights the experiences of fisherfolk, weavers, Adivasi healers, and other marginalized communities whose identities and livelihoods are inseparable from the river. Drawing on the histories of displacement caused by the Hirakud Dam, the novel situates water as both cultural archive and witness to ecological and political violence. The paper contends that by foregrounding riverine agency, *Mahanadi* advances a Global South perspective on watery entanglements and calls for ethical frameworks rooted in indigenous epistemologies. The novel, therefore, serves as a literary archive for rethinking water, culture, and survival in an era of ecological precarity.

Keywords: Blue Humanities; Mahanadi river; ecological displacement; indigenous knowledge; cultural memory

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That water drowned us, snatched from us our youth
Where will we go, Mausa, how will we live?
The dam government threw money at us
To uproot our homes, forcing us to leave (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 60)

Introduction

Anita Agnihotri's *Mahanadi: The Tale of a River* (2021), translated into English by Nivedita Sen, is a novel that defies conventional expectations of form, voice, and character. At first glance, it appears to be a regional novel that is rooted in the geographies and cultures of Odisha and Chhattisgarh yet its narrative ambition extends far beyond regionalism. This paper argues that *Mahanadi* reconceptualizes riverine agency through the lens of the Blue Humanities, a critical field that emphasizes water's role not merely as backdrop but as actor, archive, and ethical force. Central to this argument is the novel's portrayal of the Mahanadi as a sentient protagonist whose movements organize the narrative's ethics, form, and scale. This shift matters methodologically as water isn't just acted on; ideas about water actively shape hydrosocial relations, which is why hydrofiction helps track these entanglements (Boast, 2020; Linton & Budds, 2014). Agnihotri (2021) makes this status explicit as she says that the "river is the main thread in this narrative, as it moves into changing landscapes and people stay where they are. On the changing canvas of the river, therefore, human beings have come and gone" (p. 11). In this sense, the river becomes a material presence entangled in the lived experiences of communities rendered vulnerable by development.

As the narrator in the novel puts it, "I have seen this river in the form of its narrow current in winter, amidst profuse rain, in the forested region where it originates, and in the turbulent boundlessness of the estuary" (p. 11). This breadth of experience underwrites the book's claim to memory. In the translator's note, Sen describes the Mahanadi as "an unattached, beautiful enchantress…the protagonist all along" (p. 7) foregrounding the river's sensibility and presence. This establishes the conceptual ground for reading the novel through Blue Humanities, which calls attention to water's fluid materiality and narrative force. Scholars like Mentz (2015) argue that water demands narrative forms that resist linearity, while Braidotti (2013) and Bennett (2010) call for recognising nonhuman agency. These frameworks illuminate Agnihotri's method but remain secondary to this paper's central claim that the Mahanadi's agency structures the novel's polyphonic form and ethical vision. It is a vibrant matter whose flows shape human survival and knowledge systems. These theoretical strands converge more sharply when read alongside the region's long history of ecological reordering under the pressures of state-led development. These formal and ethical stakes meet political economy where capitalism's ecological regime organizes water as commodity, conduit, and hydrofiction renders those arrangements legible in both form and plot (Boast, 2020, pp. 3–4; Moore, 2010, p. 391).

At the same time, the novel's river-centered vision is inseparable from its historical and political context. The Mahanadi carries the trauma of displacement caused by the Hirakud Dam, the precarities of subsistence fishing, and the erosion of artisanal traditions under industrial capitalism. These narratives exemplify what Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence," the long-term harms borne disproportionately by marginalized communities. The novel amplifies this embedded violence through its evocation of lived memory. The history through which the Mahanadi flows further intensify these narrative stakes. The Hirakud Dam, completed in 1957 and long celebrated as a technological milestone of Nehruvian modernity, radically altered the river's basin and the futures of those who lived along it. Archival

accounts from Odisha and Chhattisgarh recall how its construction submerged more than 300 villages, rupturing agrarian and forest-based livelihoods across vast Adivasi and lower-caste belts. Families lost ancestral land without adequate compensation, forests that sustained them were fragmented or drowned, and entire communities were dispersed into unfamiliar terrains where their skills held diminished value. The novel registers these histories not through official discourse but through lived memory through the half-reaped harvests left behind in sudden evacuations, craft traditions weakened by dispersal, and emotional landscapes shaped by the knowledge that a river once central to survival had been redesigned around distant economic priorities. In "Melancholy among the Ruins," for instance, the river carries the trace of abandoned homes and submerged histories, making visible what state narratives of progress obscure. The text does not approach such displacement abstractly; it reveals how infrastructural decisions reorganize kinship networks, ecological rhythms, and ways of knowing. By evoking these histories with such specificity, the novel situates river's material and political force within a broader critique of development in eastern India, one in which the costs of progress fall most heavily on those whose lives remain intimately entangled with the river's shifting course. By embedding these histories within the river's flow, Agnihotri positions Mahanadi's shaping presence as both a narrative and a political principle. This connection between ecological force and social history strengthens the paper's central argument that Blue Humanities offers a critical vocabulary for understanding how the Mahanadi functions as witness, memory, and warning in the Global South. The river's narrative labour reveals environmental harms that persist unevenly across caste, class, and gender. By embedding such voices within its flow, the novel resists romanticized representations of rivers as timeless and benevolent, instead foregrounding their entanglement with histories of conflict, inequality, and survival.

The introduction of characters like Tularam, the Gond healer in "Baidyaraj," demonstrates this entanglement of ecological knowledge and community resilience. His herbal knowledge is inseparable from the forests and streams of the Mahanadi, dramatizing how the river sustains not only bodies but epistemologies. Similarly, the fisherfolk of "Subarnapur" depend on the Mahanadi for livelihood yet face exclusion and violence, demonstrating how caste and ecology intersect in the Global South. Women like Mahul in "Mahul Sakhi" embody the gendered dimensions of ecological precarity, their labor inseparable from the seasonal rhythms of river and forest. Across these lives, the novel maps a hydro social world shaped by shifting ecologies, state power, and community knowledge. In each case, the river is not a neutral background but an active presence shaping survival strategies and vulnerabilities. The narrative structure itself reflects this when the characters appear and disappear, but the river's flow ensures continuity. This structure enacts what Mentz describes as the "hydrographic form," where stories, like waters, branch, converge, and disperse.

This ambivalence resists simplistic anthropocentric frameworks that divide nature into benevolent resource or hostile enemy. Instead, it foregrounds what Bennett (2010) calls the vibrancy of matter; the capacity of nonhuman forces to act unpredictably, shaping human lives in ways that cannot be fully controlled. Agnihotri dramatizes this through episodes of flood, famine, and displacement, where the river simultaneously enables and undermines human survival. By reframing the river as protagonist, the author also redefines the function of literature itself. The novel becomes not merely a collection of stories about people living along the Mahanadi but a literary archive of water's cultural, ecological, and political entanglements. Festivals, food traditions, and oral stories embedded in the narrative highlight how rivers function as cultural media, transmitting memory across generations. At the same

time, the scars of development in forms of submerged villages, abandoned harvests, and lost crafts reveal how rivers bear witness to erasure and trauma. This dual function of the river as archive and witness situates the novel within what Michael Linton and Jessica Budds (2014) call the "hydrosocial cycle," where water is simultaneously physical and social, shaping and shaped by human practices. *Mahanadi* reminds us that to write of rivers is not only to write of geography but to write of history, politics, and culture. Scholars like Rutgerd Boelens (2015) have argued for water justice frameworks that foreground local rights and ecological sustainability. Agnihotri's novel anticipates such frameworks by dramatizing how survival depends on reciprocity, care, and recognition of water's agency. By situating the Mahanadi at the center of its narrative, the novel not only records the histories of a particular river but also contributes to a broader rethinking of human-water relations in the Anthropocene. The argument of this paper, then, is that *Mahanadi* exemplifies how literature can function as a site for reimagining ecological relations. By foregrounding the river's agency, the novel subverts anthropocentric narrative conventions, situating itself within the Blue Humanities while also extending that field through the lens of Global South ecologies. It demonstrates how rivers embody multiple states of being, nurture and destroy, archive memory and witness trauma, and demand new ethical frameworks. Through its attention to marginalized voices and cultural practices, it insists that water is not merely a physical resource but a cultural medium, a site of memory, and a force that shapes identities and futures. *Mahanadi* thus emerges as a compelling literary archive for rethinking the relationships between water, culture, and survival in a time of ecological crisis.

Riverine Agency and the Blue Humanities

The representation of the Mahanadi in the novel demonstrates the extent to which rivers resist singular characterization. They are simultaneously life-giving and life-threatening, serene and violent, nourishing and destructive. This fluid ambivalence lies at the heart of Blue Humanities, which approaches water not as a stable metaphor but as a dynamic force whose fluidity defies reduction to fixed meanings. In *Mahanadi*, the river embodies precisely this paradox. At one moment, it is described as "predictable, vibrant and life-sustaining in its benign manifestations" but in another as "unresponsive to human misery in its destructive incarnations of drought or flood, and resist[ing] man-made endeavours to tame it" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 8). These contradictory states are not just environmental observations but narrative principles that structure the novel's form and ethics. The novel's form, which oscillates between stories of abundance and stories of catastrophe, mirrors the river's own shifting states. Such formal fluctuation foregrounds the river's presence as an organising principle rather than a passive setting. To speak of the river as protagonist is to recognize a kind of agency that disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies. Jane Bennett's (2010) articulation of "vibrant matter" offers a useful framework here. For Bennett, matter is not inert but vital, imbued with the capacity to affect and be affected. The river exemplifies this vibrancy, actively shaping human lives through its flows, floods, and droughts. This distributed agency means that while the river may not "intend" in a human sense, it exerts power through its material force, unpredictability, and embeddedness in human life. When it sustains agriculture and fishing, it enables communities to thrive; when it overflows or dries up, it enacts devastation regardless of human need. The novel dramatizes this distributed agency, showing how the river, both exceeds and entangles human attempts at mastery. It shows that humans are not absent, but their stories are transient, brief episodes within the larger flow of the river's journey. Characters such as Tularam in "Baidyaraj," Mahul in "Mahul Sakhi," or the fisherfolk in "Subarnapur" appear with vivid intensity but soon recede, their lives folded into the river's current. What persists is not individual biography but the river's continuity.

This narrative rhythm foregrounds the contingency of human life against the river's endurance, underscoring a relational ontology rather than a human-centred one. The narrative thereby decenters human subjectivity and calls to reconceptualize humans as participants in a larger web of relations that includes nonhuman actors. The river is not background but actor, not scenery but protagonist. This structural fluidity of the novel reflects what Mentz (2015) calls the "hydrographic imagination," an aesthetic that mirrors the branching, meandering, and dispersal of water. Just as the Mahanadi splits into distributaries near its delta, the novel disperses into multiple voices and stories, refusing closure. Its form is liquid rather than solid, a river rather than a monument. This formal liquidity sits atop material networks: in cities, buried pipes make water appear as an inert "resource," primed for commodification (Alaimo, 2010, pp. 4, 12; Neimanis, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2004, p. 28). The novel resists such commodifying logics by exposing the frictions, ruptures, and intimacies that animate human–water relations. Formally, this challenges dominant realist conventions that seek coherence, resolution, and centrality by offering a polyphonic structure where the river's flow, not any character's arc, carries the narrative.

Episodes of ecological violence within the text highlight the river's refusal to be domesticated. Floods periodically devastate villages, cyclones ravage coastlines, and droughts leave fields barren. These events underscore the unpredictability of the river, its resistance to human control. At Subarnapur, "the Mahanadi is treacherous; it gives life to the fisherfolk yet swallows them in an instant" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 112). In the chapter "The Estuary," the river's dispersal into the sea is described as impossible to track: "At the south of Atharabanki, where the Mahanadi has gone and merged into the Bay of Bengal, one can hardly follow its movements and its course… innumerable streams emanate from its body" (p. 187). The image of untraceable movements resists cartographic mastery, insisting that rivers elude human efforts to map and dominate. This resistance also has temporal consequences. As Michel Serres's (1995) observes that rivers are paradigmatic of "natural time." They are cyclical, unpredictable, and non-linear in nature thus contrasting with the linear temporality of modernity. Agnihotri's narrative formalizes this non-linearity, demanding that readers follow the river's rhythms rather than impose human chronology upon it. Characters fade, epochs shift, but the river remains the axis.

The ambivalence of the river also has theological and mythic dimensions, which Agnihotri incorporates through rituals, festivals, and myths tied to the Mahanadi. In the chapter "Nila Madhava," for instance, the river is consecrated through temple rituals and food offerings, transforming water into a cultural medium that sustains faith and identity. Here, the river's vitality is framed in devotional terms, echoing the entanglement of material and symbolic waters. Yet the same river, celebrated as sacred, can also betray devotees by flooding their homes or eroding their fields. This duality undermines idealized visions of nature as purely benevolent, insisting instead on a more complex ethics of coexistence. Such moments illuminate the tensions between reverence and risk, devotion and dispossession. By emphasizing the unpredictability of water, the text implicitly critiques anthropocentric narratives of mastery and control. Modern developmentalist projects such as dams embody fantasies of taming rivers, channelling their flows into calculable outputs of electricity and irrigation. Yet as the Hirakud dam narrative in the chapter "Melancholy among the Ruins" demonstrates, these projects often generate more suffering than relief. The novel does not treat the Hirakud Dam as abstract policy rather it establishes it as a lived catastrophe. Entire villages are submerged, temples erased, and livelihoods destroyed. Agnihotri (2021) writes, "None of those who left their land and homes due to the Hirakud water reservoir got their legal compensation… People had had to go away leaving their half-reaped harvest, and their

trees bursting with fruit and blossom. It was not a journey, but an odyssey" (p. 64). The irony is stark, attempts to tame the river magnify its destructive force. Gendered metaphors around rivers deepen this critique. Like women, rivers are often imagined in patriarchal discourse as nurturing but unruly, requiring control. Agnihotri disrupts this metaphor by allowing the river's unruliness to persist, unmastered. The Mahanadi nourishes but also resists, enabling survival but also enacting destruction. It is not simply feminized as mother or goddess but acknowledged as a force with its own rhythms. It is not simply feminized as mother or goddess but is acknowledged as a force with its own rhythms and volition. By juxtaposing ritual vitality with political abandonment, the novel reinforces the central claim of this paper that riverine agency structures both the narrative and its critique of ecological injustice.

Global South Ecologies: Memory, Conflict, and Marginalization

While the Blue Humanities foregrounds the Mahanadi's material agency and formal fluidity, Global South ecologies sharpen the focus on the political and social conditions that shape human-water relations. In the eastern Indian context, especially in Odisha and Chhattisgarh, rivers are entangled with histories of displacement, caste regulation, and state-led developmentalism. These conditions are not peripheral; they are fundamental to how Agnihotri constructs riverine agency. Understanding the river's vitality therefore requires situating it within these overlapping structures of power. Across South Asia, rivers function not only as ecological and cultural lifelines but also as contested terrains shaped by inequality, conflict, and displacement. Modernization projects across India, particularly in the decades following 1947, tethered national development to water control. Dams were cast as temples of progress yet for many communities they meant dislocation and loss. South Asia is a riverine region where rivers have long sustained human and nonhuman communities, and post-1947 modernization tethered national ascent to water control (Iqbal, 2023, pp. 107–111; Mirza et al., 2008, p. 3; Sinha, 2016, p. 32). What looks like infrastructural progress from above often registers as ecological and cultural ruin at the margins. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley (2011) argue that postcolonial ecologies must grapple with the entanglement of environmental change and histories of colonialism, caste oppression, and developmentalism. The Kaibarta fisherfolk in the chapter "Subarnapur" provide one of the clearest illustrations of this condition. Entirely dependent on the river's bounty, their lives are structured around fishing cycles, boat-building, and ferrying. Yet their proximity to the river does not translate into security. Instead, they remain among the most vulnerable, subjected to both ecological precarity and social violence. The text describes how "at Subarnapur, the Goddess Lankeshwari supposedly protects the livelihood of fishermen, but no deity can save them from being murdered cold-bloodedly, or even being barred from certain areas demarcated as illegal for fishing" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 268). The river may sustain, but caste, criminalization, and regulatory policing mediate its access. Their story demonstrates how caste marginalization shapes hydrosocial relations as decisively as droughts or floods. In this context, the novel dramatizes what Linton and Budds (2014) describe as the "hydrosocial cycle," where water is shaped through power relations, not just nature. Further, these stories demonstrate what Guha and Martínez-Alier (1997) term the "environmentalism of the poor." Unlike elite conservation movements, environmental struggles in the Global South are often rooted in subsistence livelihoods. The fisherfolk's fight for access to the river is not an abstract ecological concern but a struggle for survival. Mega-dams were cast as class-neutral monuments of progress and even drew international admiration, yet they redistributed risk and silenced those most exposed to costs (D'Souza, 2008; Hart, 1956, p. 256; Nayak, 2010, p. 72; Nixon, 2011, p. 150). That triumphalist script of unitary national ascent depends on leaving "unimagined" those displaced at the water's edge (Guha, 1995, p. 1; Nixon, 2011, p. 150). By narrating these

struggles, Agnihotri resists romanticized depictions of rivers as timeless sanctuaries and instead foregrounds their role as contested sites where inequality, exploitation, and violence are enacted. The Mahanadi, in this sense, is not only a river but also a witness to environmental injustice. Rivers' social value braids access, natural capital, territory, well-being, and power, useful lenses for reading the novel's conflicts (Smith, 2020).

The same interweaving of ecology and survival is dramatized through the figure of Tularam, the Gond healer in "Baidyaraj." His knowledge of medicinal herbs derives from the forests and tributaries of the Mahanadi. His livelihood is not commodified or abstract but embedded in the rhythms of the river and its ecological networks, Agnihotri says, "He wandered around in the Sitanadi forest and the Mahanadi to its north, Sandur and the live forests surrounding the aquatic networks of its many small rivulets and tributaries" (p. 19). This relationship between healer and river demonstrates an epistemological intimacy: the river is not just a supplier of herbs but a co-actor in sustaining knowledge systems. Yet these networks also reveal fragility, for such knowledge systems are increasingly threatened by deforestation, industrial expansion, and displacement. As rivers are dammed and forests cleared, knowledge like Tularam's is not merely displaced rather it risks extinction. The Mahanadi here is not simply a source of herbs but a collaborator in the production of knowledge, making its degradation also an epistemic loss.

Gendered dimensions of ecological vulnerability appear in "Mahul Sakhi." Mahul's livelihood depends on collecting and selling forest produce, her labor directly shaped by the seasonal rhythms of the river and forest. The narrative describes how "the air has a heady fragrance that fuses sal with mahul. Inhaling deeply to fill one's veins, it feels as though the aroma of the forest is rushing through one's blood" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 371). This imagery underscores the intimacy of ecological and bodily rhythms. Yet Mahul's survival is precarious, contingent on harvest cycles easily disrupted by drought, fire, or ecological depletion. Ecofeminist readings remind us that women's labor is often rendered invisible, even as it is indispensable to survival. Bina Agarwal (1992) has argued that women's ecological labor in South Asia must be understood not as an essential closeness to nature but as structured by access, property, and power. Mahul typifies this tension as her work is crucial yet insecure, sustained by the river's flows but constantly threatened by ecological instability. In her story, the Mahanadi embodies both sustenance and betrayal, nurturing women's labor while exposing its vulnerability. Moving forward, the story of the weaving communities in "The Warp and the Weft" adds another layer to this ecology of survival. The artisans' craft depends intimately on the river, as dyeing, soaking, and washing yarns require abundant water. The text notes the "rhythmic cycle of taani (warp) and bharani (weft)… graphically portray[ing] the dynamism of a talent whose monetary remuneration is chiefly redeemed by middlemen" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 273). The warp and weft become metaphors for the interlacing of ecology and culture. It is just as yarn is dyed and woven through water, so too is the cultural fabric of the community woven by the Mahanadi. Yet this cultural richness is undercut by exploitation, as middlemen capture profits while artisans remain impoverished. The novel layers this metaphor with critique: water nourishes craft, but market structures devalue the labor that sustains it.

These narratives collectively position the Mahanadi as a site of memory, conflict, and regeneration. The river preserves the cultural memory of communities that depend on it, even as it bears the scars of displacement and violence. In "Melancholy among the Ruins," for example, the building of the Hirakud dam displaces thousands, submerging villages and temples where "People had had to go away leaving their half-reaped harvest, and their trees

bursting with fruit and blossom. It was not a journey, but an odyssey" (p. 64). Here the river becomes an archive of trauma, holding within its waters the memories of submerged landscapes and uprooted lives. Nixon's concept of slow violence surfaces here when the dam is celebrated as progress, but its violence is insidious, unfolding over generations as communities lose land, culture, and identity. The river, transformed into a reservoir, becomes both the instrument and the witness of this violence. Reservoir land-grabs, ruptured fish breeding, and reach-drying diversions make livelihoods brittle; when resettlement comes, it is often distant, inadequate, and socially fragmenting (Iqbal, 2023, pp. 107–108; McCully, 2001, p. 70; Randell, 2022, pp. 849–850). At the same time, the Mahanadi embodies regeneration. Floods and cyclones bring devastation, yet they also deposit fertile silt, enabling new agricultural cycles. Deltas nurture mangroves and fisheries, sustaining biodiversity. Crafts and rituals continue to be shaped by the river's flows. This cyclical capacity for renewal complicates any attempt to cast the river solely as destructive or benevolent, instead revealing an ecology shaped by continual negotiation. This duality of trauma and renewal, thus, underscores the resilience of communities whose survival depends on adapting to the river's rhythms. Mahanadi is neither utopic nor apocalyptic, it inhabits the complicated space of enduring precarity.

Cultural Archives of Water

This hydrofiction foregrounds the river not only as an ecological force but also as a cultural archive. The Mahanadi stores within its currents the layered histories, rituals, and embodied knowledge of the people who live along its banks. It is both a material medium and a symbolic repository, simultaneously nourishing everyday practices and recording their erosion. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019) observes, water serves as an archive of colonial and ecological histories, preserving traces that might otherwise be forgotten. In Agnihotri's narrative, water functions precisely in this dual register. Water here does not just connect past and present; it documents loss, survival, and continuity. River novels help think through how human–nonhuman relations are negotiated under management and exploitation (Linton & Budds, 2014; Poray-Wybranowska, 2021, p. 157). The narrative is rich with depictions of rituals and festivals tied to the river. In the translator's note, Sen observes how the river "meanders through myths and legends" as well as through "festivals, fairs, and oral traditions" (Sen, 2021, pp. 6-8). Festivals such as Maghi Purnima at the Rajivlochan temple, Rathjatra, Makar Sankranti, Charak Mela, and Vishwakarma Puja all appear in the text, embedded in the seasonal rhythms of the river. These events exemplify what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) describes as "the intimate histories of climate," where cultural practices are inseparable from ecological cycles. The rituals are not decorative elements; they are practices of remembering, structured by ecological time. Their cyclical repetition encodes communal memory, linking present generations to ancestral worlds shaped by the same waters. They encode collective memory, connecting present generations to ancestral traditions through seasonal repetition. By narrating these practices, Agnihotri underscores how the river serves as a cultural medium, transmitting values, beliefs, and stories across time.

Food practices likewise highlight the river's role as archive. The narrative attends to the preparation of seasonal dishes, the role of fish in local cuisines, and the use of herbs gathered from the riverbanks. These culinary details might seem minor, but they function as markers of ecological embeddedness. They reveal how communities' diets and tastes are shaped by the flows of the river, and how disruptions in its rhythms whether through drought, flood, or damming transform not only livelihoods but also cultural practices. In this sense, food becomes an archive of ecological time, recording environmental shifts in the most

intimate registers of everyday life. As anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai (1988) have argued, culinary traditions are crucial sites of cultural memory, and in the fiction, they become indices of the river's capacity to shape daily life. Craft traditions, particularly weaving, further illustrate the river's archival role. In "The Warp and the Weft," the ikat and bandha traditions of weaving are depicted as inseparable from the Mahanadi, whose waters are necessary for dyeing and washing yarn. The text highlights "the rhythmic cycle of taani (warp) and bharani (weft)… graphically portray[ing] the dynamism of a talent whose monetary remuneration is chiefly redeemed by middlemen" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 273). The warp and weft function metaphorically as well as literally: they symbolize the interlacing of ecological and cultural life, woven together by the river's currents. At the same time, the passage acknowledges the exploitation that undermines these traditions, as artisans remain impoverished while middlemen profit. The river thus bears traces not only of skill and tradition but also of eroded autonomy and exploitative market structures.

Folklore and oral traditions provide yet another dimension of this cultural archive. The narrative refers to medieval ballads and panegyrics composed around the river (pp. 318–322), linking the Mahanadi to dynastic histories and mythic narratives. Oral stories about gods, goddesses, and heroes connected to the river are passed down across generations, embedding ecological memory within cultural forms. This aligns with Homi Bhabha's (1994) conception of "cultural hybridity," where tradition is constantly rearticulated in the present. In *Mahanadi*, oral traditions rearticulate the river as both natural and sacred, linking communities to a deep temporal past while also offering resources for resilience in the present. By narrating these stories, the novel itself becomes part of this archive, translating local traditions into literary form and thereby preserving them for broader readerships. Yet if the Mahanadi functions as a cultural archive, it is also an archive of erasure and loss. Nowhere is this clearer than in the narrative of the Hirakud dam, detailed in "Melancholy among the Ruins." Built in 1955 as one of India's first major postcolonial development projects, the dam submerged villages, temples, and fields, displacing thousands without adequate compensation. The novel records this trauma with searing clarity, "People had had to go away leaving their half-reaped harvest, and their trees bursting with fruit and blossom. It was not a journey, but an odyssey" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 64). The metaphor of the odyssey captures the scale of the displacement with its depiction that it was not a temporary move but a forced migration into uncertainty, with no return possible. The dam, celebrated as a symbol of progress, becomes instead a monument to erasure.

The river's body becomes the vessel of what has been obliterated. Its surface reflects celebration; its depth holds dispossession. The harm inflicted by the dam is not spectacular but attritional, unfolding over decades as communities lose land, culture, and identity. The submerged temples and villages remain beneath the reservoir, invisible but not forgotten. This archival function is double-edged as the river preserves memory, but only as absence, as haunting. The trauma of Hirakud thus becomes part of the Mahanadi's cultural memory, inscribed into its waters as both witness and wound. The river becomes the medium through which both cultural vitality and cultural rupture are carried forward. This dual role as the archive of tradition and archive of trauma, thus, demonstrates the complexity of rivers as cultural media. They sustain festivals, crafts, and foods, transmitting memory across generations, but they also bear witness to displacement, erasure, and loss. The Mahanadi's role as archive underscores the inseparability of culture and ecology, reminding us that environmental change is always also a cultural change. When rivers shift course or are redirected by human hands, they do not just flood or dry, they unravel entire ways of life.

To study rivers, therefore, is to study cultural archives, living repositories of both abundance and suffering.

Reimagining Water Ethics

Agnihotri's framing of the river as protagonist demands an ethical rethinking of human–water relationships. The novel pushes beyond environmental representation to propose an alternate framework, one that honors water's agency and foregrounds indigenous and community-rooted epistemologies. Seeing ourselves as "bodies of water" unsettles human exceptionalism and opens relational ethics (Alaimo, 2010, pp. 4, 12; Neimanis, 2017). The novel dramatizes the limits of human attempts to master or domesticate rivers. Dams like Hirakud, constructed as monumental symbols of progress, end up producing displacement, dispossession, and cultural expurgation. The text makes this disparity stark: "The process of balancing the interests of the coastal regions with those of the basin people had always been uncertain; Hirakud had increased that gap multiple times over" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 61). Control upstream manufactures vulnerability downstream. Agricultural and industrial practices that exploit the river's resources lead to degradation and inequality. These episodes demonstrate the futility of viewing rivers solely as resources to be extracted or controlled. Yet the political terrain resists such an ethic: crisis management reframes water conflicts as technical problems, shifting politics into managerial consensus while sidelining dissent (Feltham, 2008, p. 139; Kaushal, 2009, p. 85; Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 267; Žižek, 2002, p. 303). Neo-extractivist development reimagines rivers as energy frontiers, turning ecologies into extraction zones with large socio-environmental spillovers (Acosta, 2013, p. 61; Chakrabarty, 2021, pp. 105–107; Miller, 2021, p. 3). Agnihotri's novel rejects these logics and insists on a different ethic grounded in reciprocity and attentiveness to nonhuman rhythms.

The novel calls for what might be termed "river ethics": an attunement to nonhuman rhythms, and a recognition that justice for water is inseparable from justice for its human and more-than-human dependents. This ethical vision also aligns with indigenous epistemologies that treat rivers as living entities. The narrative keeps the confluences in view: "The narrative of the Mahanadi is not complete without saying something about the river Tel. The Tel is the biggest tributary of the Mahanadi" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 99). *Mahanadi* draws on this tradition while also refusing to romanticize it. The river is sacred in rituals and festivals, but it is also unpredictable, even destructive. By presenting the river as both sacred and violent, Agnihotri avoids reducing it to metaphor and instead acknowledges its agency. This dual portrayal echoes contemporary debates about river personhood, anticipating global movements to recognize rivers as legal persons, not for their sanctity alone but because of their agency and embeddedness in ecological life. Cases such as the legal recognition of the Ganga and Yamuna as living entities in India (briefly granted in 2017) reflect a growing acknowledgment that rivers demand ethical consideration beyond resource management. *Mahanadi* participates in this discourse by dramatizing what it means to live with, rather than against, a river's rhythms.

This ethical turn aligns closely with Rutgerd Boelens's (2015) articulation of "water justice," which insists that rivers are not just material flows but deeply cultural and political terrains. For Boelens, water justice is not only about distribution but about recognition: acknowledging the cultural and spiritual dimensions of water alongside its material uses. In *Mahanadi*, fisherfolk rituals, healer practices, and artisan crafts all demonstrate how water is embedded in cultural life. To displace communities from the river is not only to deny them resources but to erase their identities. Thinking in planet-politics terms clarifies that multiple, overlapping worlds—organic and inorganic—collide in water governance (Burke et al., 2016,

pp. 2, 20). In this entangled terrain, the novel provides a literary enactment of what planetary ethics might require: humility, reciprocity, and refusal of mastery. The ethical reorientation proposed by *Mahanadi* also responds to the urgency of planetary precarity. Climate change has intensified floods, droughts, and cyclones in South Asia, making rivers both more dangerous and more crucial. Agnihotri's novel anticipates this reality by dramatizing the paradox of rivers as both lifelines and threats. This tension echoes Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2009) call in "The Climate of History" to rethink agency in light of planetary transformations. The Mahanadi, in Agnihotri's telling, is not merely caught in climate change, it narrates it. By situating the Mahanadi as protagonist, the novel asks readers to imagine water not as backdrop but as central to the human future.

Conclusion

Anita Agnihotri's Mahanadi rethinks what narrative can do when it centers not human subjects but ecological ones. Across its episodic chapters and polyphonic voices, the novel resists anthropocentric conventions, choosing instead to center the vitality, memory, and agency of water. Agnihotri closes the loop: "The chronicle of this river, therefore, is also an extract of my life" (Agnihotri, 2021, p. 11). The Mahanadi is not simply a geographical entity or metaphorical backdrop but a living force whose rhythms shape human livelihoods, knowledge systems, and cultural practices. By allowing the river to speak through its cycles of abundance and devastation, Agnihotri crafts a narrative that embodies what the Blue Humanities has called for, a recognition of water as agent, archive, and form. At the same time, the novel grounds these insights in the lived realities of the Global South. The fisherfolk of Subarnapur, the healer Tularam, the women who gather mahul blossoms, the weavers whose craft depends on river water these stories remind us that ecological questions are never just environmental; they are always political. The Mahanadi is not an abstract symbol but a contested space where inequalities are enacted and remembered. As both archive and wound, the Mahanadi functions dually: it transmits memory through festivals, foods, and rituals, while also holding submerged temples, abandoned harvests, and erased lineages. It becomes a site where celebration and trauma coexist—where cultural continuity and violent rupture are braided into the same current. What Agnihotri offers is not just a regional meditation but a literary method for the Anthropocene. By challenging the conventions of narrative coherence, human-centered plotlines, and stable temporalities, Mahanadi insists that rivers must be read as agents, archives, and witnesses. It asks us to rethink not only ecological relationships, but also the forms through which we represent them. In that sense, the novel extends not just an ethical call, but a formal one urging readers to imagine narrative itself as riverine.

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