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CONTENTS

Introduction

Introduction to Issue 27 | Prospect
By Laurie Moberg, Editor 4

Features (Peer Review)

Rivers as Creative Ecologies
By Sigma Colón and Juli Clarkson 7

Big Stone Lake Stories: Crossing Borders
By Jonee Brigham 21

Feature

Fluid Impressions: Connecting Data and Storytelling in Iowa’s Watersheds
By Eric Gidal, Munachim Amah, Javier Espinosa, Richard Frailing,
Ellen Oliver, Clara Reynen, and Kaden St Onge 46

Geographies

Narmada Parikrama
By Vivek Ji 66

In Review

All We Can Save
By Marceleen Mosher 82

Perspectives

From Symbol of Wisdom to Inducer of Anxiety: The Ganga Dichotomy
By Saloni Shokeen 86

Primary Sources

Owámniyomni: Still We Gather
By Kachina Yeager, Shelley Buck, and Sage Yeager 95

Teaching and Practice

Do You Know Where You Are?
By Laura Rockhold 105

FROM SYMBOL OF WISDOM TO INDUCER OF ANXIETY: THE GANGA DICHOTOMY

By Saloni Shokeen

The River Ganga, arising from the Western Himalayas and flowing through India and Bangladesh, covers an immense distance of 2,525 kilometers in totality.[1] The river is a pivotal source of water for most northwestern states

of India, which rely heavily on the Ganga for agricultural and personal purposes. In addition to the river's existence as a crucial resource, it also has an important religious value. The Ganga has been associated with purity, regeneration, and



The Ganga at Varanasi showing the crowded and cluttered riverbank. CC BY 2.0.

piousness for centuries. In fact, this is the global image of the Ganga which gets reproduced in popular media worldwide. While this escalation of a river to such a stature is fascinating and a curious domain in its own, it conceals the politics of pollution and the degeneration of the Ganga that should be concerning at the present moment. The religious discourse that surrounds this river has overshadowed its ruin via anthropogenic activities in recent years. While the symbolism associated with the Ganga will continue to inform our consciousness for many years to come, it is

important to recognize the material changes in the course of the river. These recent transformations in the Ganga have changed its symbolic connotations in an adverse way, producing the feeling of something called eco-anxiety. Some of the crucial questions that I seek to unravel in this essay are: How did the Ganga, the eternal goddess of piety become a site of horror and despair in the current times? To what extent can rivers, along with their current stature, serve as the markers of climate change?

Religious Lineage

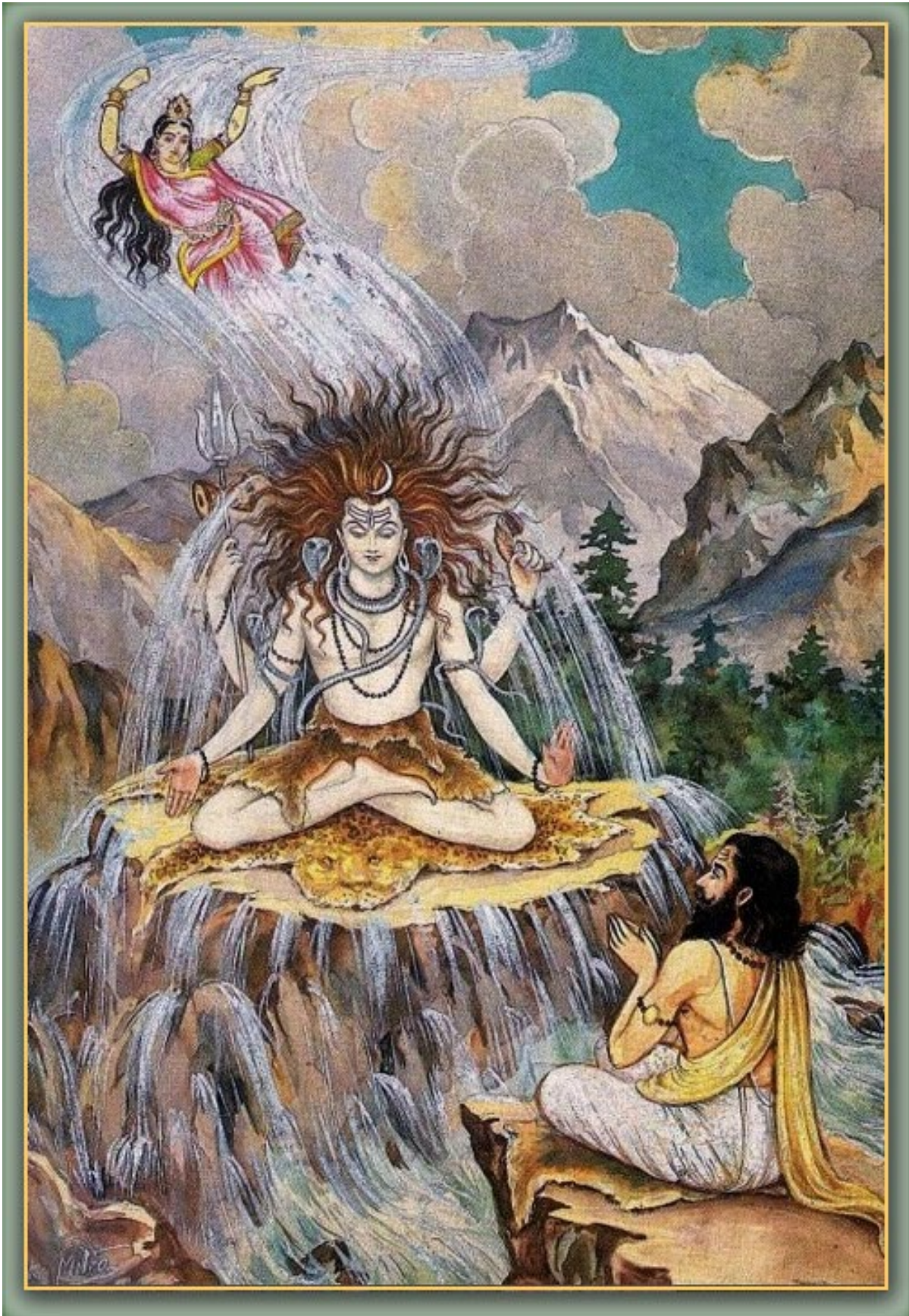
To comprehend the symbolic and literal devaluation of the Ganga, it is important to revisit the mythological lineage which has informed its historical religious value. I see the metaphorical and material changes in the composition of the Ganga as deeply connected. That is to say, the literary or cultural connotations carried by this river dissuade us from seeing its polluted reality. Yet, looking at the mythological origins is necessary as it can be used as a way to understand the contemporary degenerate existence of the Ganga.

The legend of Ganga begins with the rule of Bhagiratha who was a king of the Ikshvaku dynasty in 362 B.C.E. Also called the Suryavamsa or Solar Dynasty as they prayed to Surya or the Sun, the Ikshvaku had Ayodhya as their capital.[2] When being crowned as the king, Bhagiratha received the remains of his ancestors with the duty to cremate them respectfully. The need to attend to this responsibility grew stronger and forced Bhagiratha to leave his administrative duties and visit the mighty Himalayas. For him, *Moksha*, or the ultimate liberation of his ancestors, was the primordial duty. In the mythological tales surrounding this incident, Bhagiratha is said to have prayed to Brahma (god of creation), for thousands of years.[3] Bhagiratha's prayers were finally heard and Brahma advised him to appeal to Shiva, as

only he could "tame" the Ganga's descent to the earth. The Ganga in this tale represents spiritual purity and transcendence from the endless cycle of birth. This explains the eternal association of the Ganga with the capability to "wash off" the lifelong sins of people. As Ganga was called to descend on the earth according to the myth, the gods were concerned about its force being unbearable to the planet. Hence Shiva, one of the main gods of the Hindu pantheon, had to help the situation by slowing down the pace of the river.

A work that best describes the descent of Ganga in a poetic manner is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), a work that is often regarded as Ghosh's experiment with geology and ecology.[4] In the early pages of the novel, Ghosh can be seen challenging the constructed boundaries between mythological knowledge and scientific discourse. He does so through the character of Nirmal, who embodies radicalism and is trying to find integrative methods for teaching his students. Nirmal's account of the Ganga is an interesting one as he states:

In our legends it is said that goddess Ganga's descent from the heavens would have split the earth had lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for



Bhagiratha by B. K. Mitra.

instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river's journey—and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid becomes undone; where lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands.[5]

While this can be dismissed as a fictional story that has been retold multiple times over the years, it also recognizes the river's agency. In other words, even though the masculine figure of Shiva tries to save humanity by "taming" the Ganga, its force is unbearable. This signifies that the river is ultimately uncontainable, both in mythological understanding and as a literal

COVID-19 and the Ganga

A significant recent example revealing this mismatch between the religious image and the reality of the river is the horror that ensued after the visuals of the Ganga surrounded by thousands of dead bodies came to light. During the second phase (also known as the Delta wave) of COVID-19 in India, the cases reached their peak. From April to July 2021, the reported cases went up to 20 million with a quarter million deaths, which shocked the nation to its core. [6] Many believe that the complete lifting of the lockdown and the restrictions related to it led to this unfathomable peak in the number of COVID cases.

While COVID-19 appeared to be under control briefly after its initial arrival, during this four-month period, it seemed completely out of control. Although the healthcare system was doing its best to help people, facilities soon ran out of oxygen, a vital supplement to combat COVID. As news regarding the devastated state of

geological force. The River Ganga is an active and uncontainable presence in these mythological and religious stories, yet this can sometimes be misleading. Mythology thrives on essentialization or exaggeration of natural and human entities, omitting the reality. In this case, the overarching mythological tale that surrounds the origin of the Ganga overshadows the contemporary status of the river. In fact, the myth of eternal purity is circulated as a major defense by political and religious institutions. This makes people cling to Ganga's idealized image, which can never contain the whole truth underlying its existence. Inarguably, the river has undergone historical changes which have shaped and reshaped its geography. These changes, as they are hardly taken into account by popular culture and news networks, elude us. Hence it becomes increasingly difficult to foreground the current threats to the river.

the hospitals was broadcast across the nation, it caused an escalation of fear and anxiety amongst people. The virus became an unstoppable force that was mercilessly taking the lives of thousands of people. As the number of deaths rose each day, it was impossible to guess when normalcy would return.

Amidst this gloomy atmosphere, pictures of the Ganga's banks covered with hundreds of dead bodies went viral. Providing the means for respectful cremation for those who were losing their lives everyday became impossible for two reasons: first, because in terms of physical space, there was less and less availability; and second, because paranoia about the virus and its spread peaked. Under these conditions, the families of the deceased were left with no option but to immediately discard the bodies of their loved ones. The question of a respectful cremation which would free the souls from the eternal cycle of painful births, a practice which was important

for King Bhagiratha, was now an unachievable luxury. Instead, the Ganga was flooded with uncremated dead bodies wrapped in saffron cloth, a color signifying religious piety. Images of these bodies on the banks were first captured by Danish Siddique, who died recently while covering a conflict between Afghan and Taliban security forces.[7] Siddique's coverage of the dead bodies disposed at the banks of the Ganga were first circulated via Reuters in an article titled, "Bodies of COVID-19 Victims Among Those Dumped in India's Ganges." [8] This came out on May 15th, 2021 serving as one of the first

acknowledgements of what was happening with the rivers of India's northern states.

The tradition of cremation has been central to the belief system that surrounds the Ganga, even though this practice pollutes the river in different ways. In Hinduism, the last rites include burning of the body by holy fire in the presence of the priest and family members. In the aftermath of this ritual the ashes are scattered into the Ganga along with flowers and garlands. Sometimes the family members also immerse the clothes of the person who died as a symbol of returning their soul to river and nature. In most cases,



*Manikarnika Ghat is one of the holiest cremation grounds along the Ganga.
Image by Dennis Jarvis via Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)*

this practice is performed on the banks of the Ganga; the practice ultimately pollutes the river basin and affects life beneath the surface water. Deeply rooted in religious beliefs that have been strengthened for centuries, the practice is difficult to question and the damage it ensues is difficult for people to see. In the midst of the religious and industrial pollution that the Ganga is subjected to, the river continues to be an icon of immortal purity. In light of this, the adverse material changes in the river and its ecosystem are rarely recognized as serious problems worth consideration. Even when the damage done to the Ganga is taken into account in policies for its preservation, the impact of human activity is diminished. Nothing can come close to touching the Ganga and if it does so, the river, according to religious logic, is capable of healing and cleansing itself. Although this religious logic retains the cultural image of the Ganga, it overlooks the river's polluted existence.

Sewage waste that remains untreated is one of the primary causes of pollution to the Ganga. This comprises human and industrial waste, a form of pollution which is exacerbated by increasing population density along the river's banks. Industrial cities that are built on the river or close to it, including Varanasi, Patna, Kanpur, and Prayagraj, contribute to intensifying the problem of waste creation and accumulation. Industries and institutions, such as distilleries, slaughterhouses, textile factories, chemical plants, schools, and hospitals, continue to threaten the Ganga's waters. A report published by the Indian Department of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation foregrounds the specific sources and causes of Ganga's water deterioration arguing that 75–80 percent of the pollution comes from municipal sewage nearly 37

billion liters of untreated sewage flows into the river daily.[9] The remains of cremated bodies adds another 300 metric tons of ash to the water system each year, leading to a severely polluted river.[10]

When it comes to developing policies to preserve the Ganga basin, the issue is heavily concealed and politicized. Since the Ganga informs the religious sentiments of millions of people, it is widely used as a political tool during campaigns by the top leaders of the country. Thus, it is not surprising that soon after global media platforms such as Reuters and the BBC showcased the horrific, bony-strewn images of the Ganga, there was no national coverage of this situation. Global media houses speculated that there was some intervention by the Indian government forces in concealing the news. Although there is no way to prove this possibility, these stories did not circulate for a long period of time. While the global media remained in sad shock with this news, it did not make it to the prime hours of the Indian regional and national media. Hence, not many people within India were familiar with what their precious river was going through. Both nationally and internationally, only a minority of people who have access to particular platforms were able to witness what was really happening. Even today, the event sadly remains unknown to the majority, and those who are aware of it often dismiss it as something unfortunate that will possibly never haunt their consciences again. This incident brings some questions to the forefront: Can we move past the image of Ganga as an eternally "pure" river and recognize the material transformations it has undergone? How does this incident defamiliarize the popular imagination of the river? And how does the anxiety produced by a case like this reshape our notions of the river?

Eco-Anxiety

The phenomenon of something called eco-anxiety, or ecological anxiety, is relatively new but a timely concept that captures the realities of our world. In an article titled “The Psychology of Climate Anxiety,” Dodds explores the intricacies that differentiate climate anxiety from other forms of paranoia. Dodds foregrounds that anxiety induced by climatological changes and disturbing events that occur in the natural world has a profound impact on the human mind.^[11] The rise in dystopian events and images of disasters in popular culture have forced psychotherapists and clinical psychologists to address the multidimensionality of eco-anxiety. Its exact source and impact are hard to pin down, since it manifests itself through a range of emotions. *The Handbook of Climate Psychology* tries to describe this issue best as “heightened emotional, mental or somatic distress in response to dangerous changes in the climate system.”^[12] So what is anxiety or climate anxiety? While being induced by different factors, it is primarily produced by adverse or unanticipated negative changes, especially those which are not controllable and those which can alter our lives forever.

Questioning the reality of climate change is not new and it continues to be negated in popular culture. One of the major reasons for this skepticism is the slow pace of these changes. This is coupled with the denial of the unpleasant feelings of uncertainty and fear that the unfolding of these shifts would produce. Although the Ganga’s disturbing condition during the Delta wave of COVID-19 is not strictly an example of climate change, it nonetheless is capable of altering people’s minds and belief systems in negative ways. In such a scenario of deliberate repression of the unpleasant, incidents like that of the Ganga can be used as markers of changes in natural entities and the subsequent emotions they evoke.

If eco-anxiety can be said to arise from a situation wherein the natural space or environment

which was once familiar and safe now becomes dangerously unfamiliar, rivers are then capable of inducing climate anxiety because of our proximity to them. As the principle of familiarity gets heightened, any minor changes in the course of the river or its ecosystem would be easily seen. For instance, in the case of the Ganga’s material deterioration, shock arose as people witnessed a completely unexpected spectacle. Historically and culturally the river had been a familiar entity until that time; however, with endless corpses outlining its banks, the Ganga became an unfamiliar entity.

In literary terms, this kind of defamiliarization with something which was once known is called estrangement. In this case, the Ganga becomes a completely alien and unfathomable river for the people who once associated it with endless religious and cultural connotations. Before moving on to the river and its potential to defamiliarize, it’s necessary to look at what this effect looks like in literature.

Broadly, defamiliarization is a literary effect that is deliberately produced to create discomfort amongst audiences. Two main figures associated with this aesthetic are formalist critic Victor Shklovsky and the playwright Bertolt Brecht who called this *Verfremdungseffekt* or the alienation effect.^[13] Here, the writer is consciously trying to make the familiar into something incomprehensible and threatening. Such emotions have a resounding effect on the individual as they struggle to understand the present from the knowledge of the past. This technique is also employed by contemporary writers who are seeking to write consciously about the environment. For example, Amitav Ghosh is famous for pointing out such moments of estrangement in both his fiction and nonfiction contributions. Ghosh’s purpose is to write a literature that depicts the reality of climate change without fictionalizing the apocalypse. Doing so makes the audience believe

that it is an incident that awaits humanity in the near future. This leads to developing the idea that the present remains untouched by atmospheric changes. As opposed to this, rivers embody the realities of our times in a unique way. They form major elements in Ghosh's writing, especially in his novel *The Hungry Tide*. Ghosh is one of the writers who portrays the rivers in a realistic form, acknowledging their ecological complexities. While content on the religious connotations of rivers takes up a lot of space in Ghosh's works, he specifically traces the environmental changes through rivers as they become agents of defamiliarization. The moment of witnessing the once familiar river as something indecipherable leads to a state of derangement for Ghosh.[14]

The effect of this defamiliarization of rivers like the Ganga may not be derangement, but eco-anxiety. Rivers of our times have unfortunately become producers of eco-anxiety due to pollution via many means. The waste that surrounds and goes into many major rivers of the globe remains an increasing concern of the world

we inhabit. Often riverbanks that are polluted and devastated due to waste accumulation are never brought to our attention. As we saw in the case of the Ganga incident, such disturbing news is sometimes deemed unimportant or there is an assumption that the condition is temporary and things will eventually get back to normal. When we do see these changes, rivers like the Ganga, which have strong spiritual and religious associations, can incite ecological anxiety by becoming defamiliarized. This river has, for centuries, been regarded as closest to the gods, providing *moksha*, or ultimate liberation of the soul. However, in contemporary practices, it has become a dumping ground for waste and human corpses. This unfamiliarity provokes a question that confronts us about rivers across the planet: are rivers becoming inducers of eco-anxiety which will continue to haunt our consciousness and perhaps mobilize different actions? At the same time, we also have to wonder how reversible such changes are as part of the larger ecological conditions of our time.

Footnotes

[1] Ganga is the Hindi word for the River Ganges. The river's name changes to Padma in Bangladesh.

[2] The region of Ayodhya is famous in the Hindu epic Ramayana. It is considered the birthplace of Lord Rama, who is the central hero of this epic.

[3] In Hindu philosophy and religion, three gods are considered as central: Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. Brahma is considered the god of creation, Shiva is the destroyer, and Vishnu is the necessary preserver of all beings.

[4] Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

[5] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 6.

[6] Amita Mukhopadhyay, Geetha KB, Ipsita Debata, Charithra BV, and Manu Prakash, "COVID-19 Mortality in the Delta Wave in India: A Hospital-Based Study from Ramanagara District, Karnataka," *Cureus* 15, no. 8 (August 18, 2023): e43678, doi:10.7759/cureus.43678.

[7] Stephen Grey, Charlotte Greenfield, Devjyot Ghoshal, Alasdair Pal, and Reade Levinson, "Reuters Photographer was Killed After Being Left Behind in Retreat, Aghan General Says," *Reuters Investigates*, August 23, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/afghanistan-conflict-reuters-siddiqui/>.

[8] Krishna N. Das, "Bodies of COVID-19 Victims Among Those Dumped in India's Ganges—Gov't Document," *Reuters*, May 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/bodies-covid-19-victims-among-those-dumped-indias-ganges-govt-document-2021-05-15/>.

[9] “Pollution Threat,” National Mission for Clean Ganga, Department of Water Resources, River Development, and Ganga Rejuvenation, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://nmcg.nic.in/pollution.aspx>; and Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey, *Waste of a Nation* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

[10] Lillygol Sedaghat, “Sea to Source: Ganges’ Dispatch: The River Just needs to Flow—On Pollution, Population, and the Fate of the Ganga,” *National Geographic* blog, June 15, 2019, <https://news.nationalgeographic.org/the-river-just-needs-to-flow-on-pollution-population-and-the-fate-of-the-ganga/>; and Sreya Panuganti, “Come Hell or High Water,” *Corporate Knights*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.corporateknights.com/perspectives/guest-comment/come-hell-holy-water/>.

[11] Joseph Dodds, “The Psychology of Climate Anxiety,” *BJPsycho Bulletin* 45, no. 4 (August 2021): 222–226; <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjb.2021.18>.

[12] Climate Psychology Alliance, *The Handbook of Climate Psychology* (Climate Psychology Alliance, 2020), 22.

[13] For more information, see Victor Shlovsky, “Art as Device,” in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Dalkey Archive Press, 1990); and *Britannica*, “The Alienation Effect,” February 7, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/alienation-effect>.

[14] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*.

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About the Author

Currently enrolled in the PhD program in English literature at SUNY Binghamton, Saloni Shokeen comes from the capital of India, New Delhi. During the formative years of her PhD, she discovered her deep inclination toward rivers, especially their connotations in literature and philosophy. Her passion for rivers is particularly inspired by her close experiences with them. At the time of her master’s degree in Delhi, she would travel to explore the source of the Ganga and the valleys that surround its origin. She actively wrote about her river experiences in various blogs including the blog for *Arcadiana*. These experiences left a great impression on her and enabled her interest in portrayals of rivers in literature. She is curious to look at river journeys as both travelogue and memoir. In her dissertation, Shokeen seeks to foreground the trajectory of material and symbolic transformation in the nature and representation of rivers across the globe.