

Redefining the River Discourse—*The Angry River* and India's River Woes

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Abstract

The March 2017 Uttarakhand High Court ruling recognizing the rivers Ganga and Yamuna as 'living entities', necessitates investigation of the rhetoric shaping discourse regarding rivers in India today. In the course of this paper, I shall try to map how this rhetoric influences the way these 'entities' are approached by policy documents and popular praxis in the country. Development measures and policy viewing the river as an object/resource to be controlled and manipulated, lead to intensive human intervention in the natural flow of the river, greatly affecting its capacity of self-renewal and regeneration. I shall be closely reading Ruskin Bond's novella *The Angry River*, with close attention to the illustrations by Archana Sreenivasan alongside research by R. Umamaheshwari, Brij Gopal and Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, to understand the possibilities such creative interventions have in redefining the 'riverscape' and highlighting the importance of embracing the disequilibrium natural to the river. I shall also be referring to the *Delhi Declaration* of the India Rivers Week in 2014 and its recognition of the disastrous effect of an instrumentalist and utilitarian view of rivers, for ascertaining the importance of nuanced expressions like Bond's novella in aligning with the principles articulated in the *Law of Mother Earth: The Rights of Our Planet* in Bolivia, 2010, the most significant being recognition of the right of the river to 'flow'.

Keywords: discourse, river, redefining, Ruskin Bond, *The Angry River*, Archana Sreenivasan, illustrations, disequilibrium, ecosystem

Introduction

'Sometimes the river is angry, and sometimes it is kind,' said Sita.
'We are part of the river,' said the boy. 'We cannot live without it.' (Bond, 2013, p.62)

These words exchanged between Sita and her friend Krishan, in the closing dialogue of Ruskin Bond's well-loved short novella *The Angry River*, emphasize on perceiving ourselves as part of the earth and its delicate ecosystem, adapting to its dynamic nature, rather than contouring it to suit our needs. Eugene Odum emphasized the importance of seeing the ecosystem as a 'whole' greater than its parts, stressing on the significance of biological diversity and homeostasis for ecosystem stability (Craigie, 2002, p. 85). Ruskin Bond's novella also seeks to present its characters in a similar vein, depicting Sita and her grandparents living on a small island in the middle of a vast river, their lives closely intertwined with the many moods of the river and its seasonal variations. *The Angry River* begins with these lines—"In the middle of the big river, the river that began in the mountains and ended in the sea..." (p.7), thereby vividly presenting the river in its 'wholeness'

and not in terms of its partial presence as experienced or visibly seen by any individual character. The idea of rivers as three dimensional ecosystems based on longitudinal, lateral and vertical flows of organic matter, biota and energy is essential towards re-visioning the 'river' as a dynamic, living entity, contributing to the life of 15 percent of all living organisms on the earth (Gopal, 2015, p.16).

This ecosystem, according to Brij Gopal (2015) is characterized by a certain resilience and homeostasis, or the ability to return to a state of balance after any external disturbance. He refers to the water of the river as its 'lifeblood', carrying oxygen and distributing nutrients through the riverscape, sustaining the river's assimilatory functions (p.13-27). In keeping with Eugene Odum's (1969) concept of comparing the growth and development of ecosystems with that of organisms, David Mussared (1997) compares the sap flowing through the outermost ring of the tree to the lifeblood of the river ebbing and flowing through its floodplains. He says, "Floodplains are as important to rivers as bark is to trees...Most of the processes that drive life in rivers...happen around their edges" (p.4). Human interventions causing any disruption in the flow of 'lifeblood' in this ecosystem, damages the health of the river. As the intervention intensifies, the river's capacity for self-renewal, healing or homeostasis is exhausted and the river ecology starts faltering and dying. A non-anthropocentric view would recognize the hazard of seeing the world as a resource to be exhausted for human 'well being'. Hence the necessity of revisiting prevalent ideas about the flows and processes of river systems that act as lifelines for humans and non-humans alike.

Brij Gopal's (2015) analysis of the different ways in which rivers are viewed in India, is succinct. The idea of the river as a sacred entity appears to remain only as a vestigial concept, not translating into a sense of responsibility towards the river's ecological wellbeing. For some, the rivers are a resource to be utilized and tapped for electricity and water. For others they are as drains to carry away the wastewaters, for some as waterways for transporting goods and people and for some a menace, encroaching on or destroying land that could have been 'developed' commercially and sold. Even those who consider the river as mother or goddess, do not hesitate to pollute it, somehow believing it capable of infinitely re-cleansing itself. Seeing the river as a material object, to be bound and controlled, to flow within the space provided by humans is perhaps the reason behind all measures of development and policy that miss out on understanding the river itself as a living entity, not in a metaphorical or imaginative sense, but as an entire ecosystem, harbouring within it and interacting with countless organisms.

However, other ways of perceiving the river, abound too, as R. Umamaheshwari (2015) in her research highlights the way the river is seen as a living, feminine person, "like an extended family" (p.220) by villagers in Warangal district in Andhra Pradesh. The Godavari there does not 'flood', but 'arrives'. In the local language, 'she comes' and 'leaves'. The communities of fishermen treat the floods as a natural event and part of the river's life process. Different communities of fishermen, cited by Umamaheshwari make their own sense of the river, charting their own personal histories with the river flow. She says, "If you were to remove the river from their lives, half of their histories would have disappeared" (p.227). What significantly emerges from her study is how the fishing zones of these diverse communities are created not from any state drawn boundaries, but emerge from the life cycle of fish and the river and the journey of fish down the river stream. Any change in the movement and delicate ecology of the river therefore completely dismantles and disturbs all elements of this interconnected eco-system.

The River as a 'Living' Presence in Bond's Novella

In *The Angry River*, the rise and fall of the river is understood and accepted by the characters as a natural part of the river's life and their own. Sita is used to the river water level rising every year. Only in the event depicted, the look of the river appears to be a little different and she fears that the level will rise above usual when she is alone on the island:

The sound of the river had always been with them, although they were seldom aware of it; but that night they noticed a change in its sound. There was something like a moan, like a wind in the tops of tall trees and a swift hiss as the water swept round the rocks and carried away pebbles. And sometimes there was a rumble as loose earth fell into the water (Bond, 2013, p.16).

The river exists as a living presence for the characters in the book who can read her movements and sounds. They naturally mould their lives according to the moods of the river, recognizing the centrality of her existence in their life processes.

Sita's grandfather in Ruskin Bond's novella is a seasoned fisherman and we first see him mending his fishing net. Bond highlights his knowledge of the river and its bounty, gathered over many years of living with the river. "He knew where to find the slim silver Chilwa fish and big beautiful Mahseer and the long-moustached Singhara; he knew where the river was deep and where it was shallow..." (Bond, 2013, p.9). Even though he teaches his son to fish, it is mentioned that his son had gone to work in a factory in a city far away, signifying his loss of link with this living and pulsating ecosystem that his daughter and parents are a part of. Umamaheswari (2015) in her research reflects on the way the Kapileshwarapuram fishermen go fishing for only nine months of a year, allowing the river to "breathe" in the months just prior to the monsoons till about August/September, no matter how hard it is for them to sustain themselves in these interim months, respecting the life cycle of the river and its produce. She describes the seasonal variations of the Godavari, with which the communities are in sync, as a key aspect of a "living river" ecosystem—

In peak summer months, May and June especially, Godavari is at its ebb, sobered down, almost still, as if breathing slowly, just as life is in the summer months; by early monsoon, with the first showers, it begins to pick up its life pace, there is a little more feeling and verve to the ripples that are formed on the river; and then comes the monsoon period (p.229).

In *The Angry River* too, Sita observes the seasonal variations on the river surface and is able to detect the signs of an imminent 'coming' of the river. "The sky was dark with monsoon clouds...Now it was the middle of July, and already the river was swollen. Its rushing sound seemed nearer and more menacing than usual"(p.10). These unique highs and lows of the river as discerned by the people living alongside the river, in a close relationship with it, is reconfigured drastically once the river is dammed and seen as a resource to be constantly extracted from. A system of life completely absorbed in market dynamics forces agrarian patterns and fishing cycles to constantly 'produce'. "The river dammed is no longer a river but merely 'storage'," stresses Umamaheshwari (2015, p.233). It is perhaps important here to consider the idea that a river, whose course is manipulated and controlled, ceases to be a river really and is rendered a resource which prioritizes land-based activities and histories over and above river-based histories of the marginalized fisher-communities. The language of control and domination, which sees river water as "wasting to the sea" (p.233), is perhaps rooted in a Western conception of development, which Umamaheshwari (2015) traces also to the colonial language and perception of Indian natural

ecosystems. Arthur Cotton (1856) in *Profits Upon British Capital Expended on Public Works in India* said, “The river must be restrained from wandering, which, from its having no hard strata in its course, it always does naturally, and all its branches must be provided with artificial embankments...” (p.8). The idea of maintaining a certain water level that shall “command the country” and lead the water to every acre of land, while in the interests of land based communities at the same time fails to recognize the rhythm of lives lived with the river as a living entity.

A Polygonal View of the River Ecosystem

The necessity of constructing a new paradigm of approaching rivers that takes into account the diverse contributions and purposes of a moving dynamic river, is highlighted when we consider the example of the river Ganga, one of the most significant rivers in the country, both revered by its people for its material and spiritual sustenance as well as polluted and depleted of these very resources by its people. Even though the Ganga Action Plan failed to keep the river unpolluted and healthy, Rama Rauta (2015) in his writings tries to visualize a possible action plan for restoring the “aviral” and “nirmal” Ganga through a re-conceptualized model of development, more Gandhian in its approach (p.44-51). He urges that the ecologically fragile Uttarakhand region must be declared so and steps taken to protect the natural ecosystem of the region. Separation of sewers from the river and diversion into organic farming is essential too as also the prevention of industrial effluents from entering the river water. Hazardous chemicals from agricultural run-offs into the rivers need to be blocked too, through the promotion of organic farming processes.

On the other hand, there is Vinod Tare and Gautam Roy (2015), who see the implementation of these objectives as possible through the Ganga River Basin Management Plan (GRBMP), focusing as it does on the aquatic environment of the river and anthropogenic interference affecting it. An interesting aspect of the Plan lies in its method of visualizing the National River Ganga Basin (NRGB) as common human heritage, which, depending on its conditions could be supportive or damaging to life. While the idea of commonly owning the river system is significant for the spirit of policy making and inculcating a certain sense of responsibility seeing environmental positives as ‘capital’ and environmental negatives as ‘liabilities’, thereby assigning value to the environment; we must not lose awareness of its human-centric philosophical structure either. Seeing the river ecosystem in its entirety would require us to broaden our perspectives, continuously. Hence, what Vinod Tare and Gautam Roy (2015) refer to as the “wholesomeness” (p.59) of the river Ganga includes a polygonal view of the river ecosystem, where the river is seen as a geologic entity, at the same time a delicately balanced palimpsest of organic entities and living species and simultaneously in terms of a continuous flow of water and sediments, free of pollutants and anthropogenic interference. Such “wholesomeness” indeed is desirable and translates into the ‘missions’ or mandates of the GRBMP—involving both ecological restoration and geological safeguarding of the river along with improvement of sustainable agriculture systems and environmental knowledge building and sensitization. In many ways, it is following the route charted by thinkers like Rauta, who see the only way out of the web of pollution and indiscriminatory exploitation of available river waters, resting on re-thinking the development rhetoric adopted from the Western model of the same. Rauta suggests a return to a more ethical culture of “contentment, purity, and sustainable non-violent development”(Rauta, 2015, p.50).

In *The Angry River*, the symbiotic nature of Sita's life as lived part of the riverscape, is brought alive by the striking and vivid illustrations by Archana Sreenivasan. The lilac colour of the monsoon clouds prior to the storm appears to flow into the river waters and swirl around Sita and her grandfather mending the fishing nets (Bond, 2013, p. 11). This same colour floods Sita's imagination as she stays awake, listening to the river swelling (p. 17) and slowly spreads across the pages of the book to fill the sky and the vast river as the rains begin and Sita watches her grandfather row her grandmother away from the island to the hospital at Shahganj. Sita stands nearly merged with the waters, her dress a shade of lilac in the colour of the sky, alone, yet embedded in river (p. 20-21).

Kuntala Lahiri Dutt (2000) identifies two characteristics of geomorphology, which she thinks severely damages the way the river-discourse is framed—one in the separation of human elements from the river body and the other in viewing all river systems as similar ones. She calls for a more holistic view of rivers, integrating both the physical and human, insisting on a manner of “co-production” of rivers (2015, p.422), remembering their unique individualities and differences akin to that of human beings from each other. Simply seeing the river as a line on a map, as ‘only’ a natural element, reduces one's understanding of the complex web of life, that is the river. Corfield in *The Encyclopedia of Environment and Society* defines rivers as “large natural waterways that define civilizations, that nourished great cities alongside them, demarcate political boundaries or provide transportation routes, and carry symbolic meanings, even offering their names to countries”(2007, p. 1527-29). While this definition too is certainly not exhaustive of the multiple life processes embodied by the river, it attempts to scratch the surface of the stream!

An Attempt at Redefinition

The *Delhi Declaration* of the India Rivers Week, 2014 recognizes the “flawed conception of development that exalts consumption as the ultimate value” as one of the reasons behind the crisis faced by our rivers today, “aggravated by an instrumentalist/utilitarian engineering-cum-economic view of rivers”(SANDRP, 2014), a limiting perception of rivers merely as water resource. Recognising the ‘totality’ of the river as harbouring and interacting with innumerable organisms, is a step forward in the direction of redefining the river discourse. However, certain words in the declaration still rankle in the way they reflect certain innate tendencies of anthropocentric discourse. Article 4.3 declares, “As rivers flow, they perform many functions. Rivers are the major geomorphic agents which sculpt the earth's surface by incising deep valleys....They support aquatic and riparian bio-diversity; provide drinking water to human beings, their livestock and wildlife...”(SANDRP, 2014). The article continues in an important vein, reflecting on significant aspects like the river's influence on micro-climate, its manner of recharging ground water, carrying essential sediments to the estuary and sea thus closing the hydrological cycle on flowing to the sea, maintaining the temperature and salinity of the sea and preventing back-flow of salinity inland from the sea, thereby sustaining life cycles of fish and other marine life. While the declaration does much to resituate these important contributions of rivers to our ecosystem, it still sees the river as performing ‘functions’ for humans. Perhaps an unavoidable trap of seeing the world as engineered for humans, it would do well to remain aware of the lacunae in our linguistic patterns even as we attempt to re-vision the ‘river-lines’.

Often fiction and art provide contours much needed for this re-visioning. *The Angry River*, in its illustrations depicts the river around Sita in both its tempestuous and calm moments. The central spread of the book (Bond, 2013, p.38-39), depicting Sita hanging onto the branch of the

uprooted tree from her island, amidst the raging river waters without end, depicts her predicament as she faces the river alone. However, the river protects her too, as Krishan appears and rows her to safety. The depiction of the night scene, with its tranquil waters and moonlight streaming through the submerged trees describes a starkly different mood of the river. Marketed as a children's book, Ruskin Bond's story *The Angry River* is striking in depicting the river's many moods and variations to its young readers, attempting also perhaps to disrupt ideas of a 'model' river in 'balance' or 'equilibrium' at all times. As Article 7 of *The Delhi Declaration* states, the attempt to "control" floods often increases damage caused to human settlements by floods (SANDRP, 2014). It is important to recognize that rivers require space for flooding and land must be left free for it to do so, instead of trying to curtail its flow and floods through embankments. "The floodplain is therefore an essential and integral part of the river and must be respected. It is not vacant space available for building on, or for development" (SANDRP, 2014). Hence alongside this viewpoint, it is perhaps imperative to build a consciousness of the dynamic nature of river-cycles and not seek for its waters to always conform to a state of equilibrium. As observed by Kuntala Lahiri Dutt, "There is now a diversity of views about equilibrium amongst environmental scientists and managers, from seeing disequilibrium as temporary and aberrant, to seeing equilibrium as rare, transient and unlikely, because for some systems, the natural state is instability" (2015, p. 425). Returning to Krishan's words as quoted at the beginning of this paper, and his ready and steely acceptance of its fury and calm, depict a resilience and perspective that embraces this disequilibrium in nature and lives in tandem with it. The importance of respecting the flow of the river and its flooding is echoed in Krishan's words as he rows the boat along the raging river and observes, "We cannot fight the river, we must go wherever it takes us" (p.44). Recognizing the right of the river to 'flow' is an important step in the direction of reclaiming river autonomy for her regeneration and revival.

Embracing Disequilibrium

'Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra' or the 'Law of Mother Earth' enacted by Bolivia Plurinational Legislative Assembly in December 2010, recognizing the rights of nature is significant at the level of policy and changing public perceptions about the ecosystem. As Latha Anantha suggests in her study (2015, p.285) on the fragile river basins of Kerala, it is important to take a cue from the principles underlying such a law and apply it towards redefining our conception of rivers in India as well. Only pollution control measures cannot rejuvenate the river basins. The assumption that "water flows waste to the sea and every drop has to be utilized for human needs" (Anantha, 2015, p. 285) lying at the root of all constructions obstructing the flow of the river and industrial and agricultural run-offs destroying its delicate ecology, needs a complete overhauling. We must understand that the river too needs water for its own ecological functions, holding within its folds the local communities and pluriform biota in its waters and floodplains. The river waters as they naturally change over its longitudinal, lateral and vertical flows is precious as it's the only natural entity connecting the varied natural environments of the hills, the floodplains and the sea over the course of its journey. Discontinuities caused by human interventions and multiple dam constructions badly disturb this balance.

The last lines of *The Angry River* are evocative of the river as a living entity—"Along its banks, for hundreds of miles, lived millions of people, and Sita was only one small girl among them, and no one had ever heard of her, no one knew her—except for the old man, the boy and the river" (Bond, 2013, p.62). Holding in its waves the memories and histories of its people, the river becomes a repository of Sita's struggles, her joys and sorrows, a companion through the

course of her life. Ruskin Bond's tale encourages us to revise our approach to rivers, as pulsating and palpably alive ecosystems. The Uttarakhand High Court's landmark judgement of March 2017 in a public interest litigation (PIL), declaring the Ganga and Yamuna as 'living entities' (Mittal, 2017) shall go a long way in re-instating the rights of these river ecosystems and help people fight against violation of these rights. In a first of its kind, the ruling shows a growing awareness towards the need of protecting the right of a river to 'flood' and 'flow' as well as ensuring its purity and sanctity in the face of growing encroachments and indiscriminate endeavours to dam its gurgling journey. It is hoped that declarations and policies striving to 'save' Indian rivers today, shall imbue themselves more in such nuanced understanding of the rivers and forge a better future that sees rivers as entities and not functionaries, enabled by humans more sensitized to seeing themselves as part of a larger ecosystem. The figure of Sita and Krishan sitting on a small rock, their feet dipped in the river (Bond, 2013, p. 60) posit a picture of calm after the raging floods. The hut rebuilt into the huge rock on the island, sits in the backdrop, signaling life restarted and resumed in rhythm with the river's beneficence and moods. While not absolutely discounting the necessity of certain human interventions and constructions on the 'riverscape' given population density and its increasing lifestyle demands; perhaps an approach to rivers, understanding them as pulsating and palpably alive to the ecosystems within their waters and around them, shall help modulate and re-think the methods and manners of such interventions and redefine the way we locate ourselves in the ecological matrix, allowing rivers to be 'angry' or calm, in their natural processes of regeneration and renewal.

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