

Four Travelogues on the Politics of River: Water Conflict, Climate Change, and Ecocide

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the biopolitical and ecocritical aspects of water insecurity and hydro-hegemony, centring river narratives through River Dog, Himalaya, Tales from the River Brahmaputra, and The Braided River. Besides, it examines how environmental negligence, climate change, and geopolitical conflict, especially between India and China, threaten riverine ecologies and vulnerable downstream populations. The Brahmaputra River becomes a contested space where dam-building races, colonial legacies, and ecological violence intersect. Rivers' multifarious roles in the lives of people, especially in the Indian state of Assam, showcase their unprecedented impact on culture, livelihood, ecology, society, religion, identity, and economy. Simultaneously, increasing climate variability pushes the same civilisation to the brink of extinction, as seen in travel narratives related to Dibrugarh town and Majuli river island through erosion, flooding in Assam and Bangladesh, and illegal immigration, which exacerbate land insecurity, identity crises, and political conflict. The fear of Chinese dams in Tibet is linked to small-scale fishermen's precarious livelihoods in Goalpara, Assam, as well as fears of potential weaponisation of dam water downstream. Illegal logging, disappearing river dolphins, death and suffering of animals in Kaziranga National Park, isolated river island communities, and tragedies in river boat transportation highlight the river's role in civilisation survival, water conflict, climate change impacts, and the necessity of ecological and legal remedies in politics. The analyses of travel narratives expose marginalisation through firsthand observations amid global power struggles and argue that recognising ecocide as an international crime could help mitigate rising environmental dangers and ensure trans-boundary ecological justice.

Keywords: Water insecurity; dam; ecocide; travel narratives; climate change; riverine ecologies

INTRODUCTION

Water insecurity and climate variability are fomenting inimitable quagmires for people around the world. The corollaries are overt in increasing water conflicts, capricious weather patterns, and aberrant climate disasters. In the crusade to fortify their respective water resources, nations increasingly defy one another in heterogeneous affairs, referring to conflicts that include various political, cultural, territorial, and environmental issues in addition to the river. Water has transformed into the new gold, a resource that may fuel future wars. As a result, the weakest populations, in other words, the indigenous and marginalised groups with limited adaptive capacity and political strength, bear the burden of water conflicts as a struggle for survival. Literary compositions have represented these themes in varied contexts, yet travel writing, despite its raw narratives, has remained marginal. This paper examines the politics of rivers through travelogues

such as *River Dog* (Shand, 2003), *Himalaya* (Palin, 2010), *Tales from the River Brahmaputra* (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2000), and *The Braided River* (Choudhury, 2021). While these works feature the thrill of travel and the experience of new cultures, people, philosophies, and environments, their narratives of assorted experiences and observations also reflect hydro-hegemony, that is, the strategic leverage held by upstream riparian regions in regulating the flows of shared transboundary rivers. (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006). The increasing tendencies of environmental negligence and their current and potential ramifications are vividly documented in these travelogues. From China's proposal for the world's largest dam in Tibet, located in a highly sensitive seismic zone and its downstream impacts on Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Bangladesh, to India's own dam proposals in Arunachal Pradesh and the resistance from indigenous populations, *Tales from the River Brahmaputra* and *The Braided River* depict the looming ecological imbalance. China's construction of a super dam poses a significant threat of transboundary river water conflict between India and China. India's interests are largely at stake, as China controls the upstream flow of the river and can trigger sudden floods, reduce freshwater flow, and harm lower riparian ecology and civilisations (Chellaney, 2025). Assam and Bangladesh, both heavily dependent on the Brahmaputra River, are already suffering from the detrimental effects of climate change. Similarly, Bangladesh is positioned as the seventh most vulnerable nation to climate hazards, posing serious long-term dangers. Evidently, the mentioned reports and assessments spotlight risk and governance, but they do not fully delineate the human, cultural, and political dimensions of narratives tied to ecological challenges and water conflicts. Travelogues become an effective medium for exposing environmental sensitivity along with descriptive ground-level reporting, storytelling, and reflections of manifold communities and landscapes, including rivers often at the centre of disputes. This essay critiques the ecocritical and biopolitical interplay of environmental factors in *The Braided River*, *Tales from the River Brahmaputra*, *River Dog*, and *Himalaya*, accentuating neo-colonialism, materialism, eco-violence, and anthropocentrism. China's occupation of Tibet and the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959 and the Sino-India war of 1962 underpin India's fraught relationship with China. Both nations are now in a dam-for-dam race, putting locals at risk, as described in *Tales from the River Brahmaputra* (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2000) and *The Braided River* (Choudhury, 2021). The Brahmaputra originates in Tibet, flows through Assam and Arunachal Pradesh to Bangladesh, creating biopolitical governance concerns, as the Chinese dam could be weaponised in bilateral crises.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A Walk Along the Ganges (Berwick, 1986), a travelogue composed by Dennison Berwick, narrates his two-thousand-mile journey by the River Ganga of India through weaving history, culture, and ecology. His account is an instance of a river transcending its mere natural entity, instead becoming climactic in the survival, dominance, and conflict that runs through Indian civilisation. Similarly, a comparative account is echoed in *The River at the Centre of the World* (Winchester, 1996) by Simon Winchester through its depiction of the River Yangtze that contributed immensely to the shape of Chinese civilisation. Simultaneously, the writer's focus on the river's role in serving the needs of modern civilisation through its hydropower generation and subsequent river governance affecting the people is also substantial. A comparable feature is reflected in Stephen Alter's *Sacred Waters* (Alter, 2001), which emphasised the existence of the River Ganga in India in the realm of socio-religious and cultural sanctity, along with elucidating ecological precarity and its effect on

politics, governance, and development. Moving on to a global perception, *Down the Nile* (Mahoney, 2007) by Rosemary Mahoney expounds her unprecedented and audacious journey by the River Nile to witness the river's impact on the civilisation of the region and its ecological entity. Eventually, her account reveals how the river becomes politically charged, questioning the hegemony of power, access, and cultural restriction in the context of gender. These travelogues interweave rivers in heterogeneous forms from cultural and political to ecological, imparting a critical foundation for the present endeavour. Drawing from this base, the appraisal of selected travelogues, *Tales from the River Brahmaputra* (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2000), *River Dog* (Shand, 2003), *Himalaya* (Palin, 2010), and *The Braided River* (Choudhury, 2021), displays travelogues transcending the documentation of landscapes by articulating the eco-political dimensions and tensions of South Asian rivers. However, what remains underexplored in existing accounts is how travelogues on South Asian rivers, by both South Asian and non-South Asian writers, engage with ecological dissension, indigenous resistance, and posthuman perspectives. They also rarely address transboundary water issues, thereby underlining a crucial gap in literary and ecocritical studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs Rosi Braidotti's (2013) concept of posthuman ethics to understand the interdependence of humankind with other species and ecological systems, underscoring the rethinking required of prevalent anthropocentrism. Alongside this, Timothy Clark's (2015) notion of climate change as perceived by humankind is applied to comprehend human attitudes toward the planet and its ecological systems. In both theoretical applications, the focal point is on river narratives in the selected travelogues. Importantly, a pluralistic approach is adopted, drawing on additional frameworks such as necropolitics (Mbembe, 2019), biopolitics (Foucault, 2003), the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016), sympoiesis or "making with" (Haraway, 2016), capitalism's contradictions (Harvey, 2014), and the environmentalism of the poor (Guha, 2002), to explore dimensions that posthuman ethics and climate change alone cannot fully capture. Not all aspects of Braidotti and Clark are applied, as some elements are not directly relevant to river-related politics, water conflicts, and the social, ecological, and political complexities under investigation. This selective, integrative approach allows the study to illuminate multiple intersecting factors in river governance, human-environment relations, and water dispute narratives, while maintaining analytical clarity and focus.

DISCUSSION

RIVER DAM, BIOPOLITICS, AND THE QUESTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The increasing human population is a burden on the environment. In order to alleviate the demands of populations, nations use nature as a solution to curb various problems, including rising energy demands, food supplies, and water unavailability. Along with numerous issues, it also gives rise to water conflicts over water bodies, especially transboundary rivers, for water security. Similarly, the same is seen in the Chinese planning of building a dam on the Tsangpo River (Brahmaputra), as depicted by the author in *Tales from the River Brahmaputra* (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2000, p. 75). The author's quest to explore the Brahmaputra River from the source acquainted him with

the issue in Tibet in 1997. He remarks that the water of the Great River will be diverted to the mainstream Chinese regions by damming (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2000, p. 75). The Chinese mega dam construction began in 2020, and the Indian government announced its own version of dams to counter the same in Arunachal Pradesh, as expounded by Samrat Choudhury in the travelogue *The Braided River* (2021) (Choudhury, 2021, p. 59).

This context is understood in the circumstance of Chinese water scarcities and massive populations. Being neighbouring states and the world's two most populous nations, China and India are thirstier than ever. Therefore, the act of building the world's largest dam is a bone of contention between the nations, as India's two northeastern states, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, are highly dependent on the water of the said river for their survival. This dam has the potential to reduce water supply, create flash floods, and push the downstream civilisation to perish. The Chinese dam is a reflection of neo-colonialism, an ugly element of imperialism that tries to dominate critical water bodies and make downstream nations such as India and Bangladesh vulnerable (Nkrumah, 1965, p. 5). With six per cent of freshwater reservoirs and nurturing twenty per cent of the world population, China is obligated to deal with water insecurity in dry areas with the South-North Water Transfer Project (SNWTP) and Red Flag River Project (Leung, 2023). Consequently, the ongoing construction of a mega dam in Tibet, as depicted in *The Braided River* and *Tales from the River Brahmaputra*, is a solution to its water issues. The potential ramifications on the lower riparian nations expose Chinese use of biopolitics (Foucault, 2003, p. 243) to exercise power over downstream populations. The planned dam also raises the question of environmental justice (Bullard, 1990, p. 75) for the marginalised community beyond the border, as the riverine ecosystem is compromised to serve the purpose of the state. The brutal suppression of native Tibetans' resistance against the Gangtuo dam building and displacement displays the degree of environmental injustice a state can exercise over its own citizens (Wong, 2024). As portrayed in *The Braided River*, the indigenous people's agitation against the Siang and Dibang dams proposed by the Indian government to counter the Chinese dam in Arunachal Pradesh is also bought off with financial power and suppressed with paramilitary forces (Choudhury, 2021, pp. 103-104). It showcases the complicated form of environmental injustice that tries to justify its actions and undermine indigenous environmental rights. Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence (2011, p. 2) is visible in the state's mechanisms to regulate dam protestors through surveillance, false promises, legal dilemmas, and displacement. The local people opposing the state are victims of environmental injustice, though the state frames it as development, clean energy, and resistance against the Chinese dam. The helpless natives are silenced, and their weak political representatives exacerbate the situation. The natives of Arunachal Pradesh, along with those of Assam and Bangladesh, are already vulnerable to the Chinese mega dam. The Government of India's own version of big dams in the same area, despite having national interest, is threatening the existence of indigenous communities. The natives are surrounded by two-dimensional dangers due to their powerlessness and subaltern circumstances (Spivak, 1988, p. 24).

THE RELATIONSHIP OF CLIMATE CHANGE, RIVER AND TRAVELOGUE

In the words of Timothy Clark,

Environmental subjects such as climate change often appear mundane to readers and the general public. People tend to favour human-centric themes like love, hatred, tragedy, and cruelty, rather than engaging with the complex processes of climate or weather systems. As a result, climate change discussions frequently digress and become trapped in superficial, person-centred arguments. The rise of anthropocentric thinking, shaped by power dynamics, reduces environmental issues to matters of human survival. This trap must be replaced with a broader focus on the Earth and its ecological systems.

(Clark, 2015, pp. 182-183)

Despite unenthusiastic human perception in literary representations of climate change, writers are relentlessly weaving the current scenarios through literary creativity. Travelogue is one such vehicle for the litterateurs to depict the exacerbating climate conditions around the globe with personal experiences. The study focuses on riverine narratives through the lens of climate variability as found in *The Braided River*, *River Dog*, *Himalaya*, and *Tales from the River Brahmaputra*. Each writer's exploration of riverine civilisation uncovers the alarming realities of climate change's impact on rivers and their connection to water insecurity. Each writer's exploration of riverine civilisation unearths the frightening realities of climate change's effect on rivers and their relationship with water insecurities. Mark Shand's experience of visiting the world's largest river island, Majuli, on the river Brahmaputra in the Indian state of Assam, exhibits how the climate crisis is consuming the island, and it is on the brink of extinction (Shand, 2003). The same is propagated by Samrat Choudhury in *The Braided River* (Choudhury, 2021, p. 231) and *Himalaya* by Michael Palin (Palin, 2010).

The climate crisis has severely threatened Majuli's native boat-making craft. Despite its cultural significance, only a few artisans remain, including Prasanna Bora and Dharmeswar Hazarika of Salmora village in Assam's Majuli district (Bhattacharya, 2024). Continuous land erosion, deforestation, and concerns over the adverse effects of upstream dam construction have deprived the region of essential raw materials. Moreover, importing these materials from elsewhere has become economically unfeasible (Bhattacharya, 2024). The absence of a bridge until 2025 in Majuli has led to numerous boat-related tragedies, making boats the only viable means of transportation to the outside world. Mark Shand, in *River Dog*, narrates one such tragedy where sixty people drowned in a ferry accident with no survivors. He also describes the mourners and relatives who returned to the site to scatter the ashes over the Brahmaputra River, underscoring the river's dual role in shaping and distorting lives in Assam (Shand, 2003, pp. 90-91). On the other hand, Assam's precarious position in the global climate crisis index, due to unprecedented floods, severe land erosion, and landslides, pushes the region toward further vulnerability (Sarma, 2021). This is reflected in *The Braided River* through observations such as the near extinction of river dolphins (Xihu) in the Brahmaputra (Choudhury, 2021, pp. 258-259), illegal timber transport along the rivers (Choudhury, 2021, p. 175), and reliance on non-state medical initiatives across various Brahmaputra River islands (Choudhury, 2021, p. 166). Samrat Choudhury's encounter with local resident Manju Barua sheds light on the plight of illegal migrants from Bangladesh living in Assam. These migrants survive on the river, navigating familiar waters reminiscent of their homeland, exposing the dire situation of climate refugees (Choudhury, 2021, p. 278). They have settled on the Brahmaputra's islands (char and chapori), living on boats and selling vegetables, which underscores the growing issue of climate-induced migration. Consequently, this population remains neglected and invisible due to their illegal status, with the state attempting to

control them through isolation, a manifestation of Foucault's concept of biopolitical neglect (Foucault, 2003, p. 243)

Environmental migrations from Bangladesh to Assam have caused an unparalleled population explosion, economic disparity, and political crisis in the region. Ironically, Assam itself suffers from internal climate refugees displaced by land erosion and devastating floods. Accordingly, even lawful citizens have been wrongly targeted as illegal foreigners alongside undocumented immigrants (Sinha, 2019). This wrongful targeting reinforces the complex relationship between environmental conditions and national identity. Fragile environmental circumstances have forced rightful inhabitants into identity struggles, representing tensions of eco-nationalism (Dawson, 1996, p. 4). Flooding in Assam, once a natural and beautiful process, has now been transformed due to the adverse effects of climate change, causing widespread destruction. In *River Dog*, Shand (2003) recounts witnessing the worst flood Assam and Bangladesh have experienced, surpassing all previous records (pp. 108, 218). He notes that five million people suffered in twenty-one of Assam's twenty-three districts, including losses to precious wildlife and damage to Kaziranga National Park. Similarly, Choudhury (2021) in *The Braided River* describes worsening flood conditions reported by locals and their impact on Kaziranga (pp. 263). He explains how floods force animals to migrate uphill to places like Karbi Anglong, where poachers threaten them. While rhinos receive forest authority protection, other animals become susceptible to hunting and accidents (Choudhury, 2021, p. 263).

Palin (2010), in *Himalaya*, also narrates Assam's flood fury, outlining how monsoon floods submerge the riverbank where he awaited a jetty to Majuli island, cutting off communication with the region (p. 285). Together, these accounts reveal an increasing pattern of unnatural flooding and its consequences on local communities. This situation is closely tied to Assam's growing climate threats. Rising global temperatures intensify monsoons, causing heavy rainfall that leads to floods, soil erosion, and wetland degradation. Inadequate flood management combined with climate variability worsens annual flood impacts; one flood event claimed seventy-one lives and affected 3.2 million people across thirty districts (Dhar, 2022). According to the National Centre for Disease Control (2024), Assam's average annual temperature increased by 0.59°C from 1951 to 2010 and is projected to rise between 1.7 and 2.2°C by 2050. Extreme rainfall is expected to increase by up to 38%, with unprecedented heat waves reaching 40°C (National Centre for Disease Control, 2024). Assam is thus expected to face far greater flooding and disasters than those depicted in travelogue narratives.

Moreover, the annual, exacerbating floods of Assam must be understood through the multifaceted layers of casualties, aligning with Timothy Morton's concept of "ecognosis" (Morton, 2016, p. 5). In *The Braided River*, the author's engagement with people connected to Kaziranga National Park unveils that floods have long been a recurring phenomenon in the region. The Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) described the annual floods as a "necessary evil," a sentiment echoed by a wildlife veterinarian who noted that Kaziranga wouldn't exist without them, as the park is composed of nearly seventy per cent wetlands (Choudhury, 2021, p. 268). The floods of Kaziranga National Park and Assam, termed a "necessary evil," align with the logic of "Dark Ecology," as propounded by Morton (2016, p. 160). This concept involves accepting the ecological reality of violence, suffering, and uncertainty alongside benevolence and the mysterious forces of nature. The floods in Assam, as documented in these travelogues, demonstrate that despite their destructive force for both humans and nonhumans, they serve as an impetus to sustain agriculture, civilisation, and the unique biodiversity of Kaziranga National Park. Awareness of dark ecology shapes the mind to acknowledge the symbiotic contradictions of ecology, as is evident in the river.

The river, with its unmatched beauty, also brings terror and death, demanding acceptance of the coexistence of both elements for sustainability.

Furthermore, in both *The Braided River* and *River Dog*, the authors' exploration of the Brahmaputra River in the Dibrugarh district of Assam exposes the experience of "solastalgia" (Albrecht, 2019, p. 27) by people residing on the riverbank in Dibrugarh town. Choudhury (2021) notes that much of the old town was lost and submerged under Brahmaputra waters due to the 1950 earthquake (p. 163). Similarly, Mark Shand in *River Dog* reveals the fear of extinction of Dibrugarh town owing to the river's constant erosion (p. 219). Shand portrays how the residents feel the town might vanish completely due to its environmental history, showcasing the sufferings of ecological grief (Holthaus, 2020, p. 129). This exemplifies the passive effects of climate change on Dibrugarh's residents, generating an unintentional urgency to address the issue. Concurrently, the town's residents are victims of invisible and indirect brutality, resonating with Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2), a violence devoid of monumental transformations still capable of slowly consuming populations through ecological disasters. The narratives in both travelogues illustrate the necessity of viewing the relationship between the Brahmaputra River and Dibrugarh through the lens of deep ecology (Caliskan, 2024, p. 147).

In *The Braided River*, Choudhury (2021) narrates the government's plan to develop the infrastructural aspects of the Brahmaputra River during his exploration of the downstream region in Assam. He notes that alongside the mega initiative to transform Guwahati into a smart city, the government has allocated a ₹40,000 crore package to dredge the Brahmaputra and convert it into a navigation corridor. However, the author expresses concern due to the river carrying the largest sediment load compared to any other river (p. 305). This dredging initiative, while intended to mitigate flooding, risks exacerbating the climate crisis. The Water Resources Department of Assam claims that dredging will help with water retention and reduce erosion and flood frequency. Yet, a study on the Paraná River revealed that dredging significantly altered natural river functions and caused harm to aquatic metabolism and the broader ecosystem (Gonzalez et al., 2025, p. 14). Similarly, dredging has been used in the Amazon River basin of Brazil to combat extreme droughts, illustrating a global trend (Magnani, 2024). These instances underscore how river dredging is deeply entangled with anthropocentric interventions. Human beings employ anthropocentric solutions to address climate crises they themselves have instigated, what Timothy Clark terms "Anthropocene disorder" (Clark, 2015, p. 145).

Choudhury's (2021) narrative about the Brahmaputra's influence in lower Assam, particularly Goalpara, discloses the dire ordeal of local fishermen. He recounts meeting five fishermen, including Nazrul, who inherited his livelihood but now hesitates to continue due to fish scarcity despite diligent efforts. The critically endangered baghair fish, once abundant and capable of weighing 120 to 130 kg with a market value exceeding one lakh rupee, has become rare. An elder conjectured that Chinese dam construction in Tibet has led to increased river sedimentation and muddy waters, contributing to fish scarcity (pp. 331-332). Small-scale fishermen like Nazrul suffer from ecological biopolitics, which may trigger food insecurity and economic imbalance. China, as the upper riparian state on the Brahmaputra in Tibet, wields consequential power to control water flow, fisheries, agriculture, and even weaponise water in times of conflict. This dynamic reflects eco-imperialism (Driessen, 2003, p. 34), where China's financial and ecological dominance facilitates control over transboundary water resources at the expense of lower riparian countries like India and Bangladesh. This asymmetrical power dynamic overlooks the socio-cultural, environmental, and economic concerns of downstream populations.

RIVER IN THE NEED OF ECOLOGICAL LOVE AND
POSTHUMAN UNDERSTANDING

Rosi Braidotti (2013) in *The Posthuman* exposes the transformative potential of the posthuman shift, stating that it:

presents a valuable opportunity for humanity to come together and decide what it is capable of becoming. It offers an unprecedented chance for the human race to reinvent itself positively by focusing on creativity and empowering ethical relationships, rather than on fear and vulnerability. This moment should be used to identify opportunities for resistance and empowerment on a global level.

(p. 195)

However, humankind's widespread acceptance of capitalist ideals and mechanisms has extensively harmed ecology. Fragile ecosystems provoke unusual ecological phenomena, prompting human responses that often perpetuate ecological destruction, either directly or indirectly. In essence, humanity applies the same anthropocentric logic to lighten an anthropocentric crisis. For example, climate variability is frequently addressed through increased use of air conditioners, which contribute to extreme weather events, rather than tackling root causes like deforestation or fostering an understanding of the interdependent coexistence between humans and the environment. Similarly, vital water bodies, rivers, second only to seas and oceans, suffer from these anthropocentric consequences, reflecting broader environmental degradation. In the travelogue *Himalaya* by Michael Palin, on his quest to discover Himalayan civilisation, he reached Digboi town in the Tinsukia district of Assam, northeast India. From Digboi, Palin journeyed for an hour to reach Tipong Mine. He narrated seeing coal mine workers arriving on bicycles in the morning. He joined one of the groups on a narrow cable bridge, and forty feet underneath, he discovered a sluggish river, transformed from a pristine mountain stream into industrial garbage mixed with oil streaks and oxides (Palin, 276). This narrative exposes humankind's ignorance of the river as an ecological entity, driven by capitalist ambition and anthropocentrism. The river's condition, from pristine beauty to polluted water, is deeply connected with capitalist greed, sacrificing both human and nonhuman factors. Recognising powerless humans' obligation to suffer the dirty water is somewhat an acceptance of the anthropocentric hierarchy. Therefore, while human concerns are valid, the nonhuman river must also be recognised as an entity capable of representing itself against exploitation. Granting legal personhood to the river (Edirisinghe & Suchet-Pearson, 2024), along with recognising pollution issues caused by Tipong Mine under the framework of ecocide (Moribe et al., 28), is pivotal in pragmatically embracing the posthuman.

Recognising the posthumanist urgency, the capitalist exploitation caused by Tipong Mine on the pristine river must be addressed through strict accountability in environmental regulation and enforcement. In this context, legalising ecocide as a stringent and uncompromising law to protect healthy river ecosystems is essential for the sustainability of planet Earth. To combat future challenges such as greenwashing, despite rigorous legal frameworks, public awareness and accountability remain crucial (De Freitas Netto et al., 2020). Mark Shand, in *River Dog*, recounts a conversation with his temporary co-traveller Aditya, revealing that decades of unregulated deforestation in Bhutan and China's Tibet, which left hills bare, resulted in soil erosion directly into the Brahmaputra River. Consequently, monsoons in Assam and Bangladesh suffered severe flooding (Shand, 252). This unchecked ecological disruption upstream by China and Bhutan caused great devastation downstream, exemplifying widespread apathy toward nature. The human-centric destruction also exploits powerless human communities in flood-affected regions of Assam and Bangladesh. A posthumanist perspective challenges human exceptionalism here: although

humans, by centring themselves, caused extensive deforestation and environmental degradation, the consequences cyclically impact those very human populations downstream. This marginalisation of nature's interconnectedness is situated with Patricia MacCormack's argument advocating the acceptance of human and nonhuman interconnectedness through posthuman ethics. In *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory*, MacCormack states:

Posthuman ethics tries to comprehend new and imaginative ways of forming relationships between lives. It transcends traditional rules of morality, instead focusing on active, flexible, and creative modes of connecting with others. Furthermore, it considers both human and nonhuman bodies as central to our living, thinking, and imagining of new ways of existence. This ethical approach explores new relationships among bodies that reject old systems of control and embrace liberty.

(MacCormack, 2012)

In his quest to explore the role of the Brahmaputra River in downstream Bangladesh, Mark Shand, in *River Dog*, narrates a meeting with a fellow passenger, an old Bangladeshi man, who recounted his experience of severe monsoon floods. The man stated that the year was the worst flood he could remember, with ninety per cent of his country submerged and sixty million people rendered homeless. Thousands lost their lives, still he refused to blame the river, instead criticising the government's failure to provide relief, which could have saved his son and granddaughter. He expressed regret, saying that if medical aid had arrived, his family members would still be alive (Shand, 296). The man's attribution of blame to the government rather than the river reflects an understanding of the river as a nonhuman entity, more a friend than an enemy, despite its destructive power. This indicates that common people dependent on the river acknowledge the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans, aligning with posthuman ethics that explore such relationships.

Simultaneously, the government's failure to act responsibly by imparting flood relief embodies biopolitical violence. Flood-affected marginalised people become victims of a politics of death. The exploitation of the nonhuman has ultimately influenced anthropocentric perspectives, as the river's floods disproportionately affected marginalised Bangladeshis. The state's anthropocentric stance implicitly accepts some human deaths as justified collateral damage for broader goals, connecting to necropolitics (Mbembe, 66). Achille Mbembe argues that sovereignty involves control over death rather than life as a form of power (Mbembe, 66). The Bangladeshi government's neglect of flood victims thus reflects this justification of exploiting both nature and marginalised humans. This represents a moral failure to protect the entire ecosystem, including rivers, forests, hills, and people. The state overlooks that the destruction of nature is directly linked to human suffering, as survival depends on the nonhuman and vice versa. Hence, the human race must embrace the concept of the Chthulucene, as posited by Donna J. Haraway, a concept advocating for united living and dying, rejecting domination, and emphasising interspecies collaboration in an entangled world (Haraway, 31, 43). In *The Braided River*, Samrat Choudhury's visit to Dibrugarh revealed the living conditions of the Brahmaputra River's Island inhabitants. Transportation to these river islands relies solely on boats or helicopters, making travel difficult. The writer travelled on a houseboat named *Akha*, which was converted into a mobile boat clinic by Sanjoy Hazarika of Jamia Millia Islamia University to provide medical aid to isolated river islands. Doctor Bora of the boat clinic informed Choudhury that during the rainy season, river waters inundate the islands, destroying crops, cattle, and homes. The islanders frequently must relocate their homes and remain largely cut off from the mainland due to their inability to afford boat fares, which range from five hundred to one thousand rupees. Since India's independence, only in 2008 did the islanders receive any assistance, governmental or otherwise, via the *Akha* boat

clinic (Choudhury, 2021, p.p. 165-168). Likewise, Mark Shand narrates witnessing river islands (chars) disappear during monsoon floods and describes how island villagers rebuild homes and traditional bamboo-filled boats (Shand, 218). The isolation, neglect, and limited aid provided by this joint state-private initiative underscore the minimal efforts to preserve the human population in these regions. Nonetheless, the failure to recognise the river as a vital stakeholder reveals the ignorance of state and non-state actors toward the river's ecological role and vulnerabilities. Constant erosion and erratic water levels, driven by human-induced factors, are marginalised issues that will ultimately harm the very population benefiting from the *Akha* clinic. A posthuman perspective is imperative to address the sustainability, resilience, and vulnerabilities of both the river and its island communities. To coexist and survive with the river, islanders must respect its needs, and in response, the river creates conditions for human coexistence. This dynamic aligns with the posthumanist concept of sympoiesis, or “making with” (Haraway, 2016, p. 5), which advocates for co-creation and interconnected existence, rejecting individualism. The islanders need to understand the Brahmaputra River’s rhythms when developing infrastructure, preventing deforestation, and aligning their livelihoods to support the river’s health. State and non-state actors must uphold this respect for the river to safeguard the future of these vulnerable island communities; otherwise, the consequences of neglect will be borne by the very people living on these islands.

In *The Braided River*, Samrat Choudhury explicated the British role in shaping the floodplains of lower Assam during his downstream exploration of riverine influences. The colonial land-use policy brought Muslim peasants from the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh in the early 1900s. The previously uncultivated wasteland of the Brahmaputra River’s floodplain was converted into rice and jute cultivation, giving rise to a new community in Assam known as the Miya community, or *Na Asamiya* (New Assamese). Consequently, this was another reason the Goalpara and Dhubri districts remained linguistically tied to Assam rather than West Bengal. Despite this, the community's identity has been the subject of political debate due to suspicions of illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Today, their rising political influence has created new tensions with Assam's native population, and many Miya individuals have been excluded from the NRC list due to a lack of documentation or suspicion (Choudhury, 348-349). This policy also had detrimental effects on the Brahmaputra's ecosystem. The floodplain, once a natural buffer zone where native populations avoided agriculture and settlement, was transformed, resulting in increased riverbank erosion, silt disruption, biodiversity loss, and damage to fish nurseries, birds, amphibians, and migratory species. In the twenty-first century, these regions have become more vulnerable to floods, erosion, landslides, and extreme climate threats due to the British undermining of natural riverine patterns and seasonal rhythms. A posthumanist perspective moves beyond viewing this as simply a labour migration story, revealing instead the overlooked narrative of riverine ecosystems, wildlife, soil, and wild plants devastated by British colonial capitalism. Contrary to the British perception of the floodplain as empty, it was an ecological entity that colonial powers exploited through an anthropocentric, profit-driven lens. In the same narrative, Choudhury compared the exodus of Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh to the colonial importation of various tribal groups from central India to Assam for tea plantation labour, jute farming, and related work (Choudhury, 348). Similarly, the travelogue *Tales from the River Brahmaputra* recounts the migration of future tea planters travelling from Calcutta to Assam via the Brahmaputra River on a month-long journey in search of comfort and wealth. The British campaign resulted in numerous migrant deaths due to disease in Assam's unique dense forests and environment (Baldizzone & Baldizzone, 2000, p.p. 189-190).

In *River Dog*, Mark Shand (2003) chronicles his encounter with a *majhi* (traditional boatman), Gamma, who was the captain of the ship *Kailash*, arranged by the author's friend, Aditya. Gamma, having inherited the livelihood of a *majhi* from his father, spent his life navigating the Brahmaputra River. Notably, he recounted a time when the journey from Dibrugarh to Calcutta, ferrying sixteen hundred passengers, took merely six days. During World War II, Gamma assisted in transporting aviation fuel and military equipment via the Brahmaputra in 1944, exposing the river's strategic and logistical importance (Shand, 2003, pp. 236-237). Moreover, Gamma recalled a harrowing near-death experience while delivering food stock to a family residing in the *char* (riverine island) during the monsoon. A massive tide pulled him under, forcing him to cling to a log for over twenty-two hours before being washed ashore near Guwahati. This traumatic episode reinforced his reverence for the river, which he annotated as a divine being, "a god that must be revered." His perspective underscores the *majhi* community's deep spiritual and cultural connection to the river, viewing it not merely as a water body but as a sentient, life-sustaining force. Gamma's veneration for the Brahmaputra as an eternal companion reflects a deep ecological sensibility, one that recognises the river's nonhuman agency. This outlook resonates with Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, which identifies a reservoir of shared, ancestral memory and archetypes that transcend individual experience (Jung, 1959, p. 20). Gamma's reverence for the river as a divine presence parallels these archetypal symbols rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions, revealing the *majhi*'s intuitive posthuman understanding of the river's role in sustaining life and identity.

Similarly, in *The Braided River*, Samrat Choudhury (2021) recounts the endemic issue of illegal logging in Assam, which he was introduced to by Dr Bora and a crew member of the Akha boat travelling through the Brahmaputra's islands. According to Dr Bora, timber smuggling continues unimpeded due to the involvement of multiple stakeholders: sawmill owners, villagers, forest officials, police, local politicians, and even media outlets. The normalisation of this ecological exploitation is driven by economic dependency, where climate concerns become secondary. Notably, the author's first guide in Dibrugarh was a timber businessman, ironically dubbed "Mr Smuggler" (Choudhury, 2021, pp. 174-175). This entrenched exploitation reflects a silent ecocide, a systemic and ongoing destruction of ecosystems for economic gain, aligning with the definition proposed by Moribe et al. (2023), who advocate for recognising ecocide as a prosecutable crime under international law (p. 28). The author underscores how, despite a 1996 Supreme Court ban, deforestation continues, fed by downstream transportation of logs from Arunachal Pradesh during monsoon flooding. This persistent exploitation is emblematic of capitalism's contradiction, where profit motives undermine the ecological foundations required for long-term survival, as analysed by James O'Connor (Gerber, 2025, p. 1).

Furthermore, this extractive economy exposes the uneven impact on social classes: while the bourgeoisie profit significantly, the proletariat, the villagers involved in felling, transporting, and rafting logs, gain little and bear the brunt of ecological degradation. The state's passive endorsement of this neoliberal arrangement, compounded by the absence of viable economic alternatives, leaves marginalised communities locked in unsustainable practices. The proposed solution requires state-led structural reforms, including community-based forest management, ecological literacy programs, and livelihood diversification, steps consistent with REDD+.

Recommendations to reduce emissions from deforestation (Pfaff et al., 2010, pp. 42-43). Transitioning from the logging economy to river dam resistance, Choudhury (2021) recounts his meeting with Oyar Gao, an elder from the Adi tribe and a vocal activist in Panging, Arunachal Pradesh. Gao, a devout follower of the Donyi Polo faith (Sun God), served as Secretary General

of the Siang People's Forum, an organisation staunchly opposed to the construction of three mega dams on the Siang River. Since the 1980s, Gao has condemned political parties across the spectrum for their unwavering support of dams. He pointed out the central government's reverence for the Ganga River as "Mother," contrasting it with their disregard for the Adi community's similar veneration of the Siang as "Aane", a mother (Choudhury, 2021, pp. 98-99). This narrative reveals the structural violence described by Johan Galtung (1969), where state mechanisms systematically marginalise indigenous voices and erode local ecologies in favour of national development goals (p. 171). The displacement of indigenous identity, spiritual practices, and ecosystems by top-down developmentalism exemplifies not only environmental injustice but also cultural erasure. Despite compensation offers worth crores, villagers steadfastly refused, asserting that even if their land is worth ₹25,000, its ancestral and spiritual significance is invaluable. This resistance underlines the epistemological conflict between capitalist valuations of land and indigenous cosmologies. Facing political co-optation, the villagers responded by forming a leaderless movement. In doing so, they reclaimed their agency through protest, grassroots organising, and indigenous judicial systems such as *kebang*, a community assembly where disputes are resolved through collective dialogue, food, and traditional wine (*apong*), without bureaucratic or financial burdens (Choudhury, 2021, pp. 103-104). This localised justice system exemplifies a form of *local biopolitics*, wherein community customs govern life and relationships more sustainably than state law. Their ecological practices, like offering prayers before cutting trees and avoiding pollution of the Siang, exemplify what Bate (2000) terms a "harmonious dwelling with ecology" (p. 29).

CONCLUSION

The narratives of the selected travelogues unearth the condition of the river as witnessed by the author through ground-level exploration and experiences. The ecology, along with rivers in general, is in dire need of environmental stewardship and posthuman understanding for future sustainability, as seen in Chinese dam building in the river Brahmaputra that threatens Assam, Arunachal Pradesh in India, and Bangladesh, and the frequent floods and erosion suffered by the weakest populations, as narrated in travelogues such as *Tales from the River Brahmaputra*, *River Dog*, *Himalaya*, and *The Braided River*. In all instances of suffering caused by the river, the marginalised or the weakest populations that live by the river or depend on agriculture are affected most. Their inadequate resources to ameliorate problems caused by the river and the lack of active state vigilance make them vulnerable in multiple aspects of life. The increasing human population and neoliberal practices have turned rivers into sources of regional, national, and international conflicts, as witnessed in the narratives of the travelogues. From the necessity of erecting dam infrastructure to the agony of indigenous people resisting river dam construction for its ecological and cultural loss, rivers remain constant hotspots of tension between human and nonhuman importance. In most cases narrated by the respective authors, the deplorable plight of the rivers emphasises collective abandonment, ignorance, and the dominance of anthropocentric attitudes that are wreaking havoc on the rivers. The travelogues also demonstrate that various legal remedies, including recognising ecocide and fostering human consciousness regarding rivers and ecology, are essential to address the present and future crises of rivers. As depicted in *The Braided River*, Chinese mega dam building on the Brahmaputra and its detrimental impact on two nations, the plight of isolated river island populations, the vanishing river dolphins and fish, the shrinking Majuli Island, and the flooding of Dibrugarh and many regions along the rivers of Assam and

Bangladesh are all interconnected through a lack of posthuman understanding and coexistence with nature that discards anthropocentrism. The lethal impacts of climate change on these river issues have further degraded the river ecosystems. These travelogues, as non-fictional documents, appeal to readers to recognise the dangers of unseen climate change impacts on rivers and the urgent need for collective action and planning to mitigate these threats before it is too late for climate and environmental justice.

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