



**River, Memory, And Solastalgia: Tracing Ecological Disruption in Sudipta Sen's  
*Ganga: The Many Pasts of A River***

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**Abstract**

*Rivers are the cornerstone of civilisations, living archives, and mesmerising art of divine nature that sustain culture, cultural identity, memory, and history. Unlike oceans, lakes, and ponds, rivers are ideal carriers of fresh water for humanity, flora, and fauna. Among all the water sources, it is the only water body that determines the location of any civilisation, including the Indus Valley Civilisation (India), the Yellow River Civilisation (China), and the Nile Valley Civilisation (Egypt). It explains why the ancient river civilisation is called the "cradle of civilisations." Despite their integral and leading role in the ecosystem, rivers are contaminated and tainted in the current settings. The intriguing fact is that they contain only 2% of the world's fresh water, which is also diminishing due to a reckless human approach. Moreover, they are under mounting pressure due to the population explosion. Therefore, the present study examines Sudipta Sen's seminal text *Ganga: The Many Pasts of a River* to explore the phenomenon of ecological disruption in the Ganga River and compares the current condition to the former condition of the river, which creates a sense of solastalgia, a form of distress caused by environmental chaos and disorder. It also offers a rich narrative of the Ganga as a dynamic entity shaped by myths, empires, colonial force, nationalism, and modern development.*

**Keywords:** *Culture, Goddess, Solastalgia, Memory, Chaos, Anthropocentrism*

**INTRODUCTION:**

Ecological disruption in current settings is a ramification of severe environmental disorder, in which ecosystems lose balance due to human intervention. It also denotes the breakdown of ecological relationships—between land, water, and humans, as well as flora and fauna. Examples include pristine waterbodies turning stagnant, stinky, and poisonous, clean air becoming toxic, and fertile land becoming barren and a wasteland, creating an entirely human-made habitat that is not beneficial to anyone. In other words, the scientific and technological progress achieved by humanity in the name of Industrialisation and urbanisation not only affects humankind but also every living being, including animals, birds, and aquatic life.

Ecological turmoil in riverine settings refers to disturbed water flow, increased sedimentation, industrial and chemical contamination, decreased oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) levels, and over-extraction of

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water. Together, these phenomena affect water quality and quantity. Furthermore, it also impacts biodiversity both below and above water. Furthermore, various human activities such as dams, sand mining, deforestation, pollution, and climate change suggest that growth is achieved at the expense of the river ecosystem. For instance, dams affect fish breeding and downstream river water; meanwhile, sand mining affects the livelihoods of communities that depend on rivers and lowers groundwater levels. In addition, deforestation causes floods during the monsoon or rainy seasons because it is trees that help rainy water seep into the ground—a hydrological process called infiltration. Chemical waste, on the other hand, turns crystal-clear water into foamy and toxic water. Lastly, climate change is causing glaciers to shrink; as a result, rivers are becoming more volatile and uncertain, with diminishing water flow.

The chief cause behind river degradation is the anthropocentric mindset, rooted in the belief that humankind is at the centre of the universe. It implies that the primary role is of humans, and the rest of the species and entities have secondary roles. In other words, all other living beings and natural resources exist to serve humanity. Next, the word has its roots in the Greek words “anthropos” (humans) and “kentron” (centre), which indicates a centralised position of humans in relation to everything that exists in the manifested world. Humankind is above nature, natural resources and other entities is the major premise of the theory. Moreover, anthropocentrism tends to focus on human perceptions and values. For instance, humanity has intrinsic value, and others have instrumental value. It means others are tools or instruments for humanity so that they can live a life of ease and comfort. In addition, nature is seen as valuable not because it has intrinsic value, but because it serves human purposes. This biased perception is the root cause behind the disturbance within the ecosystem.

**AIM:**

The research aims at investigating the discourse of river studies and ecocriticism from the historical prism, comparing it with the present time ecological crisis; by bringing in the environmental history, the paper analyses the perpetual significance of river/water bodies with hydrological humanities as the base of the study.

**OBJECTIVES:**

- To locate the mythological, historical and cultural significance of Ganga as a living entity, and how the riverine ecologies help to record histories,
- To study the processes of ecological and hydrological disruptions of the rivers of India due to canalisation, damming, pollution, and riverbank configuration,
- To investigate the cultural and ritualistic significance that collapsed due to modern developmental and religio-political pressures,
- To understand the text within the framework of blue humanities, river studies, and hydrological humanities, and also to explore the anthropocentric logic that has resulted in the disruption of the water body, and how human governance and dominance destroy natural systems.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

1. How does the selected work represent Ganga as a natural water body, and what do the historically acclaimed rituals signify in contemporary times?
2. To what extent does the text show the intersections of ecology, culture, traditions, rituals, and power dynamics in the modern transformation of the river Ganga?
3. In what ways does the work of Sen critique anthropocentric and utilitarian approaches to natural resources?
4. In what ways does the cultural and religious sanctification of the river Ganga protect and endanger the river’s ecosystem?

**RIVERS, MEMORY, AND ECOTRAUMA:**

The critics state that the origin of the anthropocentrism is found in the Abrahamic traditions, including Judaism, Islam and Christianity. These institutions held the belief that humans share some specific qualities with God. According to the Book of Genesis 1.26- “God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Bible Hub). Every religious institution explains the existence and role of the supreme entity and connects humanity to that higher power. Hence, humans are made in God’s image in order to establish and teach moral doctrines and ethical directions so that individuals can live harmoniously in the natural setting. Similarly, the above biblical verse demonstrates the role of humans as protectors and caretakers. However, over time, the essence of the teachings has shifted, and so have individuals' mindsets and behaviours. The statement “humans are made in God’s image” has transformed into “humans themselves are God” in the current context. Indeed, they are the self- appointed authority. The ideology, which was once rooted in faith, has now been transformed into an exploitative one. Because humans put themselves at the centre of the universe, they consider themselves to have dominion over nature, natural resources, and every living organism. The true essence is that humans are entrusted with authority over the natural world, with responsibility and accountability; nevertheless, a transformative and distorted perspective gave birth to the “normative anthropocentric view”, which reinforces the notion that humans are superior to everything else. Ben Mylius, in the study “Three Types of Anthropocentrism”, defines three distinct notions of theory. Firstly, ‘perceptual anthropocentrism’ emphasises investigating the world through human senses, meaning observing the natural surroundings through sight, smell, hearing, and touch. Secondly, building on the perceptual approach, ‘descriptive anthropocentrism’ puts humanity at the centre of the universe. Thirdly, taking this further, ‘normative anthropocentrism’ internalises human supremacy or authority, implying that the must-haves of humans come before anything else. As Hayward notes, “It is not the concern with human welfare per se that is the problem here, but the arbitrary privileging of that wellbeing over the wellbeing of members of other species” (Hayward 59). From the above discussion, it could be argued that, as a result, anthropocentrism overlooks the significance of otherworldly objects in favour of focusing on humanity.

Sudipta Sen, in the text *Ganga: Many Past of a River*, provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the Ganga river landscape, explaining the ecological chaos in the riverine setting that began with the arrival of the British India Company in the 18th century and its control of the river plain. He writes –

*“Canals, aqueducts, and causeways transformed the waterscape of the Ganga. The introduction of the railways, with culverts, masonry brick and iron bridges, changed the views of the river forever. Somewhere through the long apprenticeship of culture under the watchful eyes of a modern industrial empire, the Ganga began to recede from its living, universal, empyrean presence, and resemble, to borrow the words of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, “a symbol and memory of the past of India.” (341)*

Through the passage, the author indicates that engineering innovations in the colonial period physically reshaped the river. The same river we see today used to be in full vigour, pristine and less polluted, before the arrival of the British. Canals, bridges, and railway structures symbolise the mindset that the river can be controlled. Consequently, the physical transformation of the river leads humanity to take rivers for granted. Hence, Jawaharlal Nehru’s words fit here perfectly: it has become a reminder of the past rather than a living force. It is no longer the magical river; it is now the most polluted river in India. In addition, the major fact is that the country’s name derives from the Indus River; however, the heart of Indian

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consciousness lies in the sanctity of this river. The river is much more than a body of water to Indian people, as it is closely associated with Lord Vishnu (The Protector) and Shiva (The Destroyer) as per Hindu mythology.

The disturbance and disorder in the Ganga riverine ecology bring a sense of dissatisfaction, anxiety, and despair, termed “solastalgia.” It refers to the anguish and discomfort one feels due to the negative and severe environmental shift. Nostalgia implies melancholic remembrance of one’s past, while solastalgia suggests the grief caused in the present by environmental degradation. It is caused by multiple factors that harm the ecosystem, including ocean acidification, mining activities, drought, floods, industrial activities, climate change, and pollution (air, water, and noise). It is primarily experienced by native communities and peasants who rely completely on nature and its resources, as it is their silent guide. Owing to the sudden changes in the local environment, communities have no choice but to leave their homelands. These people are environmental refugees and they experience solastalgia unlike residents of metropolitan regions. For instance, the agrarian communities in Africa have lost fertile land and water on which these people rely. The term was originated by Glenn Albrecht in his article “Solastalgia: A New Concept in Human Health and Identity” in 2005. According to him-

“It is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one’s sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation.” (48).

The deliberate usage of the word ‘assault’ indicates the harsh and rash behaviour of humans in treating nature, which is the major reason behind the solastalgia. As a result, individuals who once saw their natural surroundings as home no longer feel the same. The phrase “erosion of belonging” implies a disconnection from the place that was once a shelter, and is now at stake in the current era.

Further, Sen in the text reminds readers of the water quality of the Ganga when he mentions the incident from *Ain-i-Akbari*, written in Persian by Akbar’s court historian, Abul Fazal. It is a detailed and official account of the administration of Emperor Akbar. As per the description, Akbar was fascinated by the immaculate water. He had his servants fetch water and used to drink Ganga water only during his travels and campaigns. Moreover, New Zealand’s mountaineer and explorer Sir Edmund Hillary eulogises the Ganga water for its purity. He points out that it remained fresh and did not spoil in the container, unlike water from any other river, which becomes tainted (Hillary 20). Next, English traders during the British reign found that the water lasted for over a month during their long-distance continental travel, while water from other resources spoiled in a short span of days. The fact that Ganga water remains long last because its water has ‘bacteriophages.’ It is a type of virus that is capable of destroying harmful bacteria.

The author compares the former and current conditions of the river, creating a sense of solastalgia. “Ganga has two-fold characters—one as ever pure, immaculate and unsullied deity and the other as tainted, poisoned and a medium to cleanse the human misdeeds” (Sen 343). People feel a sense of loss when they observe the river’s condition because they are emotionally, spiritually, socially, and culturally tied to it. The degraded condition of the river causes indigenous communities to experience loss of identity, as their livelihood would vanish if the river lost its essence. By the end of the twentieth century, the river will become both a memory and a threat.

#### **FINDINGS:**

The present research, grounded in river studies, blue humanities, and environmental humanities, reveals not only the geographical or cartographic significance of the river Ganga

but also explores how rivers are layered by cultural and traditional meanings. Rivers also has pasts and their own memory. As Elif Shafak in her novel *The Island of Missing Trees* depicts the arboreal memory (memory of the trees), Sen, in this work, highlights the pasts of the river and the cultural significance of Ganga, in modern times, is not completely modern, but rooted well within its past(s). Thus, Ganga becomes a very corporeal and historical site of memory and ecotrauma, which has witnessed the changes, be it cultural or ecological, for ages. Even rivers and water bodies can grow with time, as humans, and they have their own lives, past, identity, existence rights, and they also can die as a human does. Therefore, rivers are living entities of a breathing ecology. The Ganges records the ancient, medieval, colonial and modern histories.

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