



International Conference – 2025: Developed India @ 2047

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Waves of Divinity: A Blue Humanities Exploration of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata

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Abstract

The Blue Humanities is an emerging academic discourse that expands ecocritical studies by focusing on water bodies, maritime cultures, and oceanic imagination. Developed by scholarships such as Steve Mentz and Elizabeth DeLoughrey, it explores how literature, history and Culture engage with water as an agent of meaning and ecological interconnectedness.

In the context of Indian epics, the application of Blue Humanities opens new interpretive possibilities. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata feature rivers, oceans, and aquatic metaphors that not only drive their plots but also reflect deeper philosophical, spiritual, and ecological insights.

This article explores how the Indian epics reveal complex ecological consciousness, fluid cosmologies, and aquatic metaphors that shape their narratives, philosophies and ethical concerns.

Key Words: *Blue Humanities, Indian Epics, Ramayana, Mahabharata.*

Introduction

Blue Humanities is an emerging interdisciplinary field that explores the cultural, historical and ecological significance of water bodies. It Challenges the terrestrial bias of traditional Humanities by centering oceans, rivers and other aquatic spaces as vital agents in shaping human imagination, literature and cultural practices. It incorporates elements from:

- Environmental Humanities (exploring the human-nature relationship),
- Ecocriticism (analysing environmental themes in literature),
- Postcolonial Studies (examining aquatic spaces in the context of Imperialism, migration and displacement),
- Oceanic Studies (focusing on maritime history. Oceanic ecological and aquatic imaginaries).

Key Theorists

1. Steve Mentz, a pioneer in the field, argues that water symbolizes fluidity, instability and interconnectedness, offering new ways to think about human experience and ecological vulnerability. His works, such as *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (2009) and *Ocean* (2020), foreground the Ocean as a metaphor for human life.



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2. John Gillis's *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (2012) examines how coastal spaces have historically shaped human cultures and identities.

Water as a Metaphor in Literature

The Blue Humanities framework offers new interpretation of canonical texts:

- Homer's *Odyssey*: The sea symbolizes both peril and freedom, shaping Odysseus' epic journey.
- Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: The Ocean embodies colonial power, displacement and natural forces.
- Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: The sea is both a literal and metaphorical force representing human ambition, the sublime and the unknown.

The Ocean in Cultural Memory

Water also plays a role in cultural memory and heritage:

- The Middle Passage: The Atlantic Ocean embodies the historical trauma of the transplanting slave trade, remembered in Black Atlantic literature and art.
- Religious Associations: In Hinduism, rivers such as the Ganges are revered as Sacred, while in Greco- Roman mythology, the sea is personified through gods like Poseidon and Neptune.
- Girmitya Folklore: The Indian indentured labourer's migration across the seas in the 19th century is remembered in Bhojpuri and Caribbean folk songs, symbolizing loss and longing.

The Sacredness of Water in Sanatan Dharma

In Hindu Cosmology, water (Apas) is revered as one of the Pancha Mahabhutas (five great elements) – Earth (prithvi), Water (Apas), Fire (Agni), Air (Vayu) and Space (Akasha). It is considered both a physical element essential for life and a metaphysical continuum of life and death. Hinduism often depicts creation emerging from primordial waters. According to the Nasadiya Sukta (Rigveda), the universe existed in a formless, watery void before creation.

The deity Vishnu is closely associated with cosmic waters. In his Narayana form, Vishnu reclines on the serpent Shesha amidst the Kshirsagar (Ocean of milk), symbolizing the eternal, unmanifest potential of creation.

Further, water bodies, especially rivers, are revered as goddesses and divine mothers in Hinduism. The Ganga, considered the holiest river is believed to have descended from Vishnu's feet and flows through Shiva's matted locks onto the earth, sanctifying it. Other venerated rivers include Yamuna, Saraswati, Godavari, Narmada, Krishna and Kaveri.



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Water plays a pivotal role in Hindu rituals, symbolizing both physical cleanliness and spiritual purification. Some significant water-based rituals includes Snana (ritual bathing), Achamana (purification), Abhishekam (ritual bathing of deities).

Water is also central to Hindu death rites and ancestor worship like Tarpana (the ritual offering of water to ancestors), Ashthi Visarjan (the immersion of ashes of the deceased in Sacred rivers).

Water is associated with fertility, abundance and agricultural prosperity. The monsoon rains, governed by Indra (God of rain) are vital for crop growth, making water both a physical and spiritual sustainer of life.

Ancient Indian Epics Through the Lens of Blue Humanities

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been analyzed from various literary, religious and cultural perspectives. Blue Humanities explores how water is not merely a setting but an active force and metaphor in texts. Applying this lens to the Indian Epics reveals the profound significance of water in the narratives.

The Ramayana

Sacred Rivers: Embodiment of Purity, Devotion and Transition

The river Ganga holds a central place in Hindu rituals in the Ramayana. The epic describes the tirtha (pilgrimage) sites along the river as places where devotees perform ablutions to purify their sins. Sita's crossing of the Ganga with Ram and Lakshman during their exile is accompanied by prayers and offerings to the river, symbolizing divine protection and spiritual Transition. Moreover, the crossing foreshadows the hardships the exiled trio will face, while the waters reflect their emotional and psychological transitions.

Dasharath's putrakameshti Yagna (ritual for obtaining progeny) is performed near the banks of the Sarayu River, highlighting the water's Sacred role in bestowing fertility and prosperity.

The Pampa Lake, where Ram meets Shabari, is described as tranquil and pure, symbolizing emotional solace and spiritual clarity.

The reverence for rivers and lake in the Ramayana reflects an eco- spiritual ethic. The Blue Humanities perspective reveals how these ritualistic interactions symbolize ecological reverence, portraying rivers as both divine and ecological entities.

Hanuman's Aquatic Odyssey: The Fluidity of Boundaries

One of the most iconic aquatic episodes in the Ramayana is Hanuman's journey across the sea to Lanka. His aerial passage over the Ocean symbolizes both physical and spiritual transcendence.



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During this voyage, Hanuman encounters several aquatic beings, including Surasha and Simhika who test his courage and determination. From a Blue Humanities perspective, Hanuman's maritime journey reflects humanity's external fascination with and fear of aquatic expanses. The Ocean becomes a space of both peril and revelation. Hanuman's seamless navigation through the fluid expanse symbolizes the transcendence of human limitations, portraying water as both an obstacle and a medium of self- realization.

The Ram Setu as an Anthropocene Symbol

The construction of the Ram Setu across the sea by Ram's army symbolizes the Anthropocene impulse- the human endeavour to reshape natural landscapes. From a Blue Humanities perspective, the bridge- building episode can be seen as a metaphor for human attempts to dominate and reconfigure nature. It also reflects the awareness of human dependence on and the struggle with aquatic forces, highlighting water as both a barrier and a unified.

Ecological Restoration through Rain

After the great battle with Ravan, the rains that fall over Lanka cleanse the war- ravaged land. In Blue Humanities, rain is seen as an ecological force. The rain following the war can be interpreted as a metaphor for nature's self- healing power.

Water as a Feminine and Fertile Force

Sita, the Central female character, is closely linked to the Earth and Water in the Ramayana. Her return to mother Earth at the end of the epic symbolizes the cyclic relationship between femininity, fertility and water. During her trial by fire, Sita calls upon the Earth as her witness. In Blue Humanities, Water is frequently a witness to human actions, symbolizing the moral and cosmic order. The Water that nourish the Earth become a witness to Sita's Purity and sufferings.

Funeral Rites by the River

The funeral rites of king Dasharath was performed by the banks of the Sarayu river, in accordance with Hindu customs. This ritual underscores the spiritual ecology of water, representing the continuity of existence.

The Mahabharata

Rajasuya and Ashvamedha Yajnas: Water as a ritual medium

The Mahabharata details grand rituals such as the Rajasuya and Ashvamedha yajnas. Water plays an indispensable role in these ceremonies. The ritual bathing of the horse and the sprinkling of holy water on the participants reflect water's purifying and consecration properties. In Blue Humanities context, water serves as a purifier of both physical impurities and Karmic burdens, merging the material and spiritual worlds. Furthermore, the use of water in rituals underscores the ecological



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consciousness of ancient Hindu practices, where the natural world was rituals engaged with rather than exploited.

The Aquatic Metaphors of Power and Destruction

Though primarily recounted in the Vishnu Puran and Bhagvat Puran, the Mahabharata reference to the Samudra Manthan episode, symbolizes the struggle for cosmic power. The churning of the Ocean by gods and demons generates both nectar and poison, symbolizing the dual nature of aquatic forces- capable of creation and destructions.

The Mahabharata uses water metaphors extensively to describe the chaos and devastation of war. The Kurukshetra battlefield is likened to a turbulent Ocean, with rivers of blood flowing and Waves of destruction rising. Through Blue Humanities this imagery highlights the destructive power of water, equating it with the wrath of divine justice.

Water As a Symbol of Cosmic Truth

The river Ganga is personified as a goddesses and mother of Bhishma, symbolizing both creation and destruction. Bhishma's immersion into and rebirth from the river reflects the cyclical nature of life and death, mirroring the perpetual flow of water.

The Yamuna, another significant river, becomes a site of krishna's divine play (leela) with the Gopis, symbolizing spiritual transcendence. Simultaneously, the poisoned waters of the Yamuna because of kaliya serpent represent ecological imbalance, which Krishna restores by subduing the serpent- a symbolic act of restoring environmental and cosmic harmony.

Water as a Symbol of Purification and Salvation

Yudhishtir's pilgrimage to Sacred rivers following the war is a form of ecological and spiritual atonement. The ritualistic immersion in the Yamuna and the Ganges signifies the cleansing of Karmic sins.

The Saraswati River, often described as mythical or extinct in contemporary geography symbolizes the loss of Sacred memory and the transcendence of Dharma In the face of temporal decay, aligning with Blue Humanities' concerns over ecological loss and cultural amnesia.

The Epic's reverence for Sacred rivers parallels present- day ecological movements aimed at river conservation, such as the ' Namami Gange' project in India.

Conclusion

The Blue Humanities approach unveils a multifaceted reading of the Indian Epics, where water emerges as a central figure in the narrative and a symbol of cultural continuity, transformational environmental consciousness. This interdisciplinary perspective encourages us to view ancient texts



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not as relics of the past but as living documents that continue to inform and inspire modern discourse on humanity's relationship with the natural world.

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