

Original Article

## SACRED CURRENTS AND TAINTED WATERS: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF THE RIVER GANGA

Dr. Shivangani Sharma<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Net-Jrf, Srf, University of Jammu, India



### ABSTRACT

The River Ganga occupies a unique position in Indian cultural, spiritual, and ecological consciousness. Revered as a divine mother and a source of spiritual liberation, the Ganga simultaneously stands today as one of the most polluted rivers in the world. This paper offers an ecocritical reading of Raja Rao's on the Ganga Ghat to examine how the river functions as a sacred, living presence within Hindu cosmology while also revealing the contradictions inherent in contemporary attitudes toward nature. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of deep ecology and eco-spiritualism, particularly the ideas of Arne Naess and Thomas Berry, the paper explores the tension between reverence and exploitation, faith and environmental neglect. Through Rao's spiritually charged narratives set in Benares, the study highlights the urgent need to reclaim an ecological ethics grounded in spiritual awareness.

**Keywords:** Ganga, Ecocriticism, Eco-Spiritualism, Raja Rao, Deep Ecology, Sacred Rivers

### INTRODUCTION

O River, daughter of Sage Janhu, you redeem the virtuous  
But they are redeemed by their own good deeds-where's your marvel there?  
If you can give me salvation-I, a hopeless sinner-then I would say  
That is your greatness, your true greatness  
Those who have been abandoned by their own mothers,  
Those that friends and relatives will not even touch  
Those whose very sight makes a passer-by gasp and take the name of the Lord  
You take such living dead in your arms

O Bhagirathi, you are the most compassionate mother of all. (Chattopadhyay 156-174)

The excerpt highlights the profound spiritual significance of the River Ganga. Known in its westernized form as the Ganges, the Ganga is revered as one of the holiest rivers in India. Originating in the Himalayan ranges, the river traverses primarily through the northern plains of the country, assimilating numerous tributaries along its course. Affectionately addressed as "Mother Ganga," "Ma Ganga," or "Ganga Devi," the river is venerated as a feminine divine force, or Shakti, believed to have descended to earth through the

#### \*Corresponding Author:

Email address: Dr. Shivangani Sharma ([Shivanganisharma78@gmail.com](mailto:Shivanganisharma78@gmail.com))

Received: 06 October 2025; Accepted: 23 November 2025; Published 20 December 2025

DOI: [10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i11.2025.6546](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i11.2025.6546)

Page Number: 138-140

Journal Title: International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

Journal Abbreviation: Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

Online ISSN: 2350-0530, Print ISSN: 2394-3629

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

Copyright: © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

matted locks of Lord Shiva. Regarded as sacred, the Ganga is traditionally understood to possess a celestial origin, reinforcing its spiritual and mythological prominence within Indian cultural consciousness.

In Indian civilization, rivers have never been regarded merely as physical water bodies; they are living entities imbued with spiritual, cultural, and moral significance. Among them, the River Ganga holds a position of unparalleled reverence. Worshipped as Ganga Devi or Mother Ganga, the river is believed to have descended from the heavens through the matted locks of Lord Shiva, carrying with her the power of purification and salvation. Yet, despite this exalted status, the Ganga today suffers from extreme ecological degradation caused by unchecked urbanization, industrial waste, and ritual pollution.

This contradiction—between spiritual veneration and environmental neglect—forms the central concern of this study. Through an ecocritical analysis of Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat*, the paper examines how literature becomes a site for negotiating the relationship between humans and nature. Rao's work presents the Ganga as a sacred, maternal presence that absorbs human suffering, redeems sin, and offers liberation. Simultaneously, his later reflections gesture toward the river's polluted reality, thus exposing the ethical failure of a society that worships nature while exploiting it.

Ecocriticism, as articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty, investigates the relationship between literature and the physical environment, addressing the absence of ecological consciousness in traditional literary studies. Bemoaning the lack of awareness about the natural world in the literary works, Cheryll Glotfelty posits, "The absence of any sign of an environmental perspective in contemporary literary studies would seem to suggest that despite its 'revisionist energies', scholarship remains academic in the sense of 'scholarly to the point of being unaware of the outside world'" (Glotfelty xv).

Deep ecology, proposed by Arne Naess, extends this inquiry by emphasizing self-realization through identification with the natural world. It rejects anthropocentrism and promotes an ethical framework in which humans recognize their embeddedness within ecological systems. Eco-spiritualism further deepens this discourse by reintroducing the sacred dimension of nature. Thomas Berry argues that ecological crises stem from a loss of spiritual intimacy with the Earth. When nature is desacralized, it becomes vulnerable to exploitation. In Hindu philosophy, however, rivers, mountains, forests, and animals are consistently envisioned as manifestations of divine presence. Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat* becomes a fertile text for exploring this convergence of ecology and spirituality.

Rao's portrayal of the Ganga draws deeply from Hindu mythology and ritual practice. The river is personified as a compassionate mother who embraces saints and sinners alike. The opening invocation from *On the Ganga Ghat* describes the river as sheltering the abandoned, the diseased, and the socially ostracized—those whom society has rejected. This maternal imagery aligns with the belief that the Ganga redeems even the most fallen souls, reinforcing her role as a spiritual equalizer. The spiritual significance of water is communicated in the given stanza:

Look at water closely the next time you are near it. Peer into its core and  
There you will see the face of God when he dreamed a world. He is reflected  
in its glorious properties. He is its mentor and its judge. Yet who could  
judge of water anything less than an exalted glory for it is pure and holy,  
more so than anything else God has spent the time to create. (Scarborough 31)

The city of Benares (Kashi), where the stories are set, emerges as the sacred geography through which this relationship unfolds. Giving utterance to the relevance of Ganga in her book, *The Sacred Geography*, Diana L. Eck states, "The Gangā, it is said, is supreme among rivers, as Kāshī, is supreme among holy cities and Himalayas are supreme among mountains" (138). Eck observes, the Ganga, Kashi, and the Himalayas form a sacred triad within Hindu cosmology. Rao's characters—pilgrims, widows, ascetics, and outcasts—arrive at the ghats seeking purification, peace, and liberation. The river is not merely a backdrop but an active agent shaping human destiny.

A recurring theme in *On the Ganga Ghat* is the dissolution of boundaries between the human and non-human world. Characters such as Madhoba, Muthradas, Shankar, and Bhola define their identities in relation to the river. For Madhoba, an orphan selling firewood for cremations, the Ganga replaces biological kinship and becomes his sole mother. For Muthradas, death by the river signifies reunion with cosmic order. Such narratives echo Naess's notion of ecological selfhood, where personal identity expands to include place and landscape.

Rao's depiction of rituals—bathing, cremation, evening aarti—further reinforces the idea of the river as a living presence. The emphasis on sensory experiences—the sound of bells, the shimmer of lamps, the rhythmic flow of water—creates what Edward Relph terms "insideness," an intimate sense of belonging to place. This deep attachment underscores the spiritual ecology embedded in Hindu cultural practice.

Death occupies a central place in Rao's narratives, yet it is portrayed not as an end but as a passage into liberation. It is an inevitable and preordained aspect of human existence, a theme that Raja Rao repeatedly underscores throughout the interconnected narratives. In this context, death is not portrayed as a fearful or tragic culmination but as a sacred communion with the divine—an ultimate union that the characters seek by remaining in close proximity to the River Ganga. Engaging with this contemplative

understanding of death, Wallace Stevens, in his poem "Sunday Morning" reflects on death not merely as an end but as a transformative force that grants meaning and fulfilment to life:

Death is the mother of beauty hence from her,  
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams  
She makes the willow shiver in the sun  
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze  
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.  
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears  
On disregarded plate. The maidens taste  
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves. (Stevens 68-69)

The ghats of Benares function as liminal spaces where life and death converge. The belief that dying by the Ganga ensures moksha informs the actions of several characters, including Rasomani and Ranchoddoss, who abandon worldly attachments to await death near the river. This conception resonates with Hindu metaphysics, where rivers are seen as veins of the cosmic body. The Ganga becomes a spiritual ladder connecting earthly existence to transcendence. By framing death as communion rather than annihilation, Rao reinforces an ecological worldview in which human life is cyclically integrated into nature.

The spiritual intimacy between humans and the Ganga in Rao's work exemplifies eco-spiritualism. Thomas Berry's idea of "moments of grace"—when humans awaken to their interconnectedness with the Earth—is enacted through characters who surrender their ego-driven desires and align themselves with natural rhythms. The river teaches humility, patience, and reverence. However, Rao does not romanticize this relationship uncritically. In the final narrative, he disrupts the idyllic portrayal by exposing the polluted reality of the modern Ganga. The gutters of Benares carrying sewage and ritual waste into the river symbolize the moral contradiction of a society that venerates purity while practicing desecration.

The closing passages of *On the Ganga Ghat* mark a significant tonal shift. Rao vividly describes the filth flowing into the river—industrial waste, ritual debris, and human remain. This polluted Ganga stands in stark contrast to the celestial river of myth and devotion. The dissonance reveals a profound ethical failure: spiritual rituals have become hollow performances divorced from ecological responsibility.

Despite her sanctity, the Ganga continues to absorb human waste, embodying a silent endurance that mirrors maternal sacrifice. Rao's portrayal anticipates contemporary environmental discourse by suggesting that faith without ecological awareness leads to destruction. The river's suffering becomes a moral indictment of anthropocentric attitudes that prioritize human salvation over environmental sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat* offers a compelling ecocritical meditation on the spiritual and ecological dimensions of the River Ganga. By presenting the river as a sacred, maternal presence deeply intertwined with human life, Rao foregrounds an eco-spiritual worldview rooted in Hindu philosophy. At the same time, his acknowledgment of the river's polluted condition exposes the contradictions of modern religiosity divorced from environmental ethics. The study demonstrates that true reverence for nature must extend beyond ritual worship to include ecological responsibility. Reclaiming the spiritual sanctity of the Ganga necessitates a renewed ethical relationship with the natural world—one that recognizes rivers not as inexhaustible resources but as living entities deserving care and respect. Through an ecocritical lens, *On the Ganga Ghat* thus becomes not only a literary tribute to the sacred river but also a powerful call for environmental consciousness in an age of ecological crisis.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Drengson, A. R., & Inoue, Y. (1995). *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. North Atlantic Books.
- Eck, D. L. (2012). *India: A Sacred Geography*. Harmony Books.
- Exploring the Sacredness of Nature. (n.d.). *Literary Journal*. <https://doi.org/literaryjournal.in>
- Garrard, G. (2012). *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203806838>
- Hardgrave, R. L. (1998). *Word as Mantra: The Art of Raja Rao*. Katha in Association with Center for Asian Studies, University of Texas at Austin.
- Rao, R. (2008). *On the Ganga Ghat*. Orient Paperbacks.