

Research Article

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Experiencing the Riverscape: An Eco-Spiritual Decoding of Gangetic ‘Triveni-Sangam’ in select writings of Neelum Saran Gour

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Abstract: Contemporary times have triggered for an interdisciplinary cusp between disciplines that were conventionally read in a hinged academic encore. The Gangetic ‘Triveni-Sangam’ near Allahabad city where three holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati converge, is believed to be the holiest riverscape as one drop of amrit (nectar) during ocean churning by Gods and demons fell into its water and therefore, bathing and dipping in this sangam or confluence is considered auspicious. It is not that people only experience such spiritual values, rather internalize the same, even sometimes beyond religious restraints formulating a holistic human and ecological bonding. Therefore, river or for that matter riverscape like sangam transcends the environmental physical boundary to the living one as it shapes people’s experiences and accordingly adds meaning in their lives. Indian English author Neelum Saran Gour’s fictional representation of the riverscape of Gangetic ‘Triveni-Sangam’ in her select writings like *Allahabad Aria* (2015), *Invisible Ink* (2015), and *Requiem in Raga Janki* (2018) are woven within the interdisciplinary framework of ‘eco-spirituality’. The present research will examine how riverscape as an eco-spiritual entity shapes individuals’ experiences and helps them to locate the ‘self’ both in vyashti (the individual) and samashti (the collective) scale.

Keywords: Riverscape; Triveni-Sangam; Eco-spirituality; Allahabad

1 Introduction

Located at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna – in mythological accounts there is a third river, the invisible Saraswati, too – Allahabad has for millennia been a spiritual metropolis... (it’s) flotsam stories cast upon its riverine banks by the advancing and receding waters of time.

-Neelum Saran Gour,
Allahabad: Where the Rivers Meet (11)

Contemporary Indian English author Neelum Saran Gour’s riverine environmental imagination is existent throughout her fictional narratives primarily in *Allahabad Aria* (2015), *Invisible Ink* (2015), *Requiem in Raga Janki* (2018) amongst others where one comes across fragments of Allahabad¹ every now and then, culminating a spiritually embedded holistic Nature and Human tie up, which is the objective of this research. With an interdisciplinary approach it becomes an

¹ ‘Allahabad’ is a North Indian ethnographic heritage city situated beside the confluence of three holy Indian rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati*. Recently the city is renamed as *Prayagraj* by Govt. of India. Since the author Neelum Saran Gour uses the city’s name Allahabad throughout, the present article will also follow the same.

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essential dimension to interpret the unmitigated presence of the North Indian holy rivers like *Ganga*, *Yamuna* etc. in Gour's narrative pages in which her characters' experience that "the river is one. It is not history or art, geography or literature, but all these and always something more" (Darian, *The Ganges in Myth and History* xvi). Despite the apparently conflicting dynamics of various disciplines, the energy exchange sifts through a *mélange* which enunciates in ecological literary imagination as an alternative cult of western anthropocentric-fascination for human reason and rationality over non-human world (Eagleton 1998; Quayson 2000) which is pervading mainstream academia. Therefore, it is also a postcolonial urge, to shift modern critical sensibility from a sole human centric approach to an inter-disciplined one implicitly outlining the multiplicity of human and ecological interconnectedness (Love 25).

This interconnectedness between river and human beings, particularly in Indian context is more than ecology and human bonding since rivers are like goddesses for their sacred water and are therefore, beyond the cusp of conventional academic disciplines as in Geography, within which rivers are considered mostly as a natural body of water resource. Even in the wake of environmental concerns and pollution issues, it has garnered immense academic attention but somewhere in-between these stakes, the 'river-ness' of a river which is not just stringent within physical gridlines, rather explored its sense and sensibilities to be read as cultural and spiritual construct. This nuanced phenomenon alluded in the environmental imagination for Indian rivers have shaped the authorial imagination of the writers like Kalidasa, Kabir, Rabindranath Tagore, Kedarnath Singh, Phanishwar Nath Renu, Bapsi Sidhwa etc. In American and British writings as well, of Mark Twain and William Wordsworth one comes across a conduit of poetics of river transcending the borders of its geometrical dimension. In the same line of thought and theoretical framework that transgresses the borders of just literary fiction, Neelum Saran Gour's select narrations represent aesthetic riverscape² of Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam* or the confluence of three holy rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati* near Allahabad city, surfeiting visual appeal to an eco-spiritual one shaping human experiences. Within 'eco-spirituality' which enhances a "a reordering of the individual's process of completion of his/her selfhood- in society and in the Spirit at the same time" (40) through natural environment as per Murali Sivaramakrishnan's notion in "Echoing Eco-Spiritual Values for a New World" (2011), the present research will examine how riverscape as an eco-spiritual contour shapes individuals' experiences and in turn is internalized by the people who experience it and strengthens the scope of self-realization both in *vyashti* (the individual) and *samashti* (the collective) scale. Synthesizing the theoretical frame with the fictional experiences of Gour's characters, the article will also extend arguments detailing upon how spiritual value of river *Ganga* or for that matter *Triveni-Sangam*, is not a phenomenon of Hinduism only, rather it transcends the religious compartmentalization formulating a holistic and secular plurality of human and environmental unification.

Such unifying influence of rivers like *Ganga* and *Yamuna* even share an emphasis in India's national anthem which reflects that the destiny of India mingles 'in the music of Ganga and Yamuna' ("*Yamunā Gaṅgā ucchala-jaladhī-taraṅga*")³ as these rivers mingle with the life of its people since antiquity. These rivers particularly *Ganga* with its unifying as well as purifying vision even found mention in diverse ancient religious texts including but not limited to Hindu scriptures like *Rig Veda*, *Purana*, *Upanishad*, *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana* etc. and one common thread that binds all the dimensions is the 'sacredness' of the river Ganges (Darian 1978; Eck 1998; Haberman 2006). In fact, this sanctified aspect of river can be an appropriate tool of spiritual experience as ecological entities are mostly pure and transcendent which often share discussions in eco-spiritual approach (Heise 2008; Sivaramakrishnan 2012; Huggan and Tiffin 2015). The same issue in Indian life is pervasive with no exception to Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam* as its sacredness transcends human consciousness transposing it to the realm of spirituality through experiences of its people and leading them to connect the 'self' with the whole. Neelum Saran Gour's riverine ecological imagination incessantly reinforces this issue through the experiences of Bablu, Mr. Triloki, Amina, Rekha, Janki and others within the riverscape of Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam* in her select fictional writings.

² The term 'riverscape' refers to the attributes of the landscape which can be found along a river, like water fall, meanders, convergences with other rivers and so on. This term has often been referred in geographical contours but literature also pertains widened scope to represent such 'riverscape'. One such 'riverscape' is the confluence of three rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati near Allahabad city which Neelum Saran Gour's fictional narratives underscore within and beyond its visual appeal to human experiences in that particular space.

³ Indian national anthem *Jana Gana Mana* is composed by Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore, basically in Tatsama Bengali which is an extensively Sanskritized version. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jana_Gana_Manā

2 Riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam*: A Living Historical and Mythical Construct

Rivers are unquestionably part of physical environment and within their natural flow they also become the noted part of landscapes (Czaya 1981; Bharati 1985; Madan 2005) generating distinct riverscape of which the confluence of *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati* river in Allahabad is a perfect example. The scenic beauty of this particular riverscape fascinates Indian authors across ages and references can even be traced in Kalidasa's⁴ *Cloud Messenger*: "Taste the crystal stream. /So would your darkened shadows swell her /As the Jumna does at Prayag, /Lending substance to a dream" (qtd. in Darian, "The Ganges in Indian Art" 312). Quite notably the *Ganga's* or *Triveni-Sangam's* visual mystifying appeal has been channelized through the poet's imagination and the same flow of river across temporality keeps alluring authors' imagination. Neelum Saran Gour's environmental imagination finds expression in the following words of Rekha from *Invisible Ink*: "Ganga with the morning sun striking it a blinding fish-scale silver. The jade-green Yamuna and the long spine of tangling waters that unfurl like a shining bale and pouring into that far horizon. And our third river. The Saraswati" (62). The scenic beauty of *Sangam* fascinates authorial imagination but there is always something underneath as riverscape is not only "what our eyes see . . . [but] always points to something else, to something beyond itself... [as] . . . a meta- physic, a religion, an idea of man and the cosmos" (Paz 15) meaning that rivers are not only physical environmental constructs but are ever lively agents of human and cosmos unification or of "holistic plurality" (29) which is at the core of 'eco-spirituality' according to Sivaramakrishnan.

What enlivens such riverscape of Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam* is actually its storied past which found its root in the Hindu mythological tales firmly grounded in riverine physical environment. These mythological stories attuned with Indian rivers are also grounded in ancient religious scriptures; as per ancient *Rig Veda*⁵ (1700 BC- 1100 BC), in *Sapta-Sindu* i.e. Indus valley, *Saraswati* river had been considered as the most sacred but in the later three *Vedas*, river *Ganga*, takes up the mantle of sacredness and across the geographical topography of Gangetic basin this sacredness flows formulating 'India's sacred geography' (Eck 1998). The innate reason behind *Ganga's* holiness is aligned with its mythological descent from heaven. According to *Purana*⁶, river *Ganga* was once part of heaven but for salvation of the souls of 60000 ancestors, Bhagirath (king of the Ikshvaku dynasty) offered prayers to Lord Shiva and likewise unlocked river *Ganga* from the matted locks of the Lord and that's why *Ganga* is also known as *Bhagirathi* river. Such revered holiness makes *Ganga* "no ordinary river" (Agarwal 3) and Hindus all over the world value its sanctity not just in their lifetime but also in and after their death. This religious discourse has also been relevant in contemporary times for it has been an appendage to the upsurge of environmental awareness wherein river *Ganga* infuses 'religion into the politics of ecology' (Drew 5). Like river *Ganga*, *Yamuna* also shares its existence in Hindu Mythology as being the goddess of love. River *Saraswati* finds extensive reference in which it became an earthly river because of Lord Brahma's curse and was visible only in select areas (Dange 1989). Although, river 'Saraswati is now nearly extinct and virtually remains an idea' (Prasad 5), its holy presence in Hinduism still remains a significant narrative in the form of mythological tales. These are till date extended in the form of holiness of these rivers and it is this holiness only which reaches its height when

4 Kalidasa (4th-5th century CE) was one of the greatest classical Sanskrit poets and dramatists in India. His magnum opus *Meghaduta* or *Cloud Messenger* is one of the most illustrious Sanskrit lyrical poems consisting 120 stanzas only which primarily recounts an exiled *yaksha's* (a compassionate nature spirit) process of convincing a passing cloud to convey a message to his wife at Alaka on Mount Kailāsa.

5 Sanskrit word 'veda' means 'knowledge'. *Vedas* are ancient Indian religious texts and there are four *Vedas*; the oldest one is *Rig Veda* and the other three are *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*. These are primarily hymns composed to be recited during performance of religious rituals. Their wider thematic range encompasses "profound and uncompromising meditations on cosmic enigmas, joyful and exuberant tributes to the wonders of the world, ardent praise of the gods and their works, moving and sometimes painful expressions of personal devotion, and penetrating reflections on the ability of mortals to make contact with and affect the divine and cosmic realms through sacrifice and praise" (Jamison and Brereton 1: 2). Quite notably, besides being celebrated Hindu religious text *Vedas* are also great Indian literary production synthesized with religious values.

6 The word 'purana' literally means 'former' or 'ancient'. *Puranas* are vast body of ancient Indian religious texts mostly comprising myths, legends, folklores etc. It is notably famous for its subtle intricacies of symbolism within its stories. The genre of 'Puranic' literature is included in both, Hinduism and Jainism. In Hindu *Puranas*, most of the texts are composed anonymously and consist a huge body of over 400,000 verses with one *Maha Purana* i.e. Prime *Purana*, seventeen *Mukhya Puranas* i.e. Major *Puranas* and eighteen *Upa Puranas* i.e. Minor *Puranas* (Dimmitt xii). As influential texts of Hindu religion *Puranas* inspire Hindu culture in totality with local to the national level of annual festivals (Rocher 12-13).

these three rivers converge near Allahabad city and thereby, this particular riverscape of *Sangam* is often assumed with godly presence and Gour's river consciousness in the short story "Southern Cross" also reflects upon this: "When they (rivers) mingle they become one colour/ And are known as Sursari, river of gods..." (*Allahabad Aria* 9).

Such perception of Godly presence within riverscape hinges upon cultural intervention within ecological world and therefore, Matt Edgeworth's comments that "most rivers are neither natural nor cultural, but rather entanglements of both" (15). Such entanglement between river and culture in Indian context shares extensive ground in Hinduism since centuries, connecting deep ecological roots to religious experiences. Christopher Key Chapple in his book *Hinduism and Ecology* explains the multifaceted dimensions of such Hindu tradition which arise human's ethical concern and awareness about rivers sacredness through the myths of water and sacredness. It is as per these myths that rivers are worshipped in India and considered as goddess. In fact, such beliefs of omnipresence of the divine within the flow of rivers, make river banks enticing sites of pilgrimage which allows devotees to experience the divine through the flow of river and this so forth precipitates distinct 'cultural geographies' (Bharadwaj 1999). It is extensively for such riverine 'cultural geographies' that religion and ecology merge and likewise, attach meaning to the riverscapes beyond visual aesthetics.

As far as the 'cultural geographies' of the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* is concerned, the cultural roots of its piousness, are not only restricted in storied mythologies of Hinduism but also extended in historical references. The historical account *Ain-i-Akbari* by Abul Fazl⁷ outlines the Mughal emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar's (1542-1605) preference for *Gangajal* i.e. the water of *Ganga* for his personal consumptions like cooking and drinking. Beyond consumption he also ensured as per historical resources, the use of *Ganga* water for weddings and festivals and there are several references of this water as being "the water of immortality" (qtd. in Kumar 14). In fact, such fascination of emperor Akbar's towards river *Ganga* later on became part of mass belief and sayings that Akbar in his previous incarnation was a Hindu *Brahmin*⁸ and jumped in the *Sangam* to rinse out his sins. Despite, authenticity of this anecdote is debatable but such sayings become part of the consciousness of residents of Allahabad and reflections are evident in the words of the boatman in *Invisible Ink*,

when Akbar Badshah⁹ came to this city (Allahabad), he recognized the place where he used to live. He recognized the tree he'd jumped from and so he decided to build his fort around the tree! At the bottom of the tree, on the river bed, live Brahma-ji and Shiv-ji and Vishnu-ji – that's why this place is called Triveni. (Gour 63-64)

This implicates that the consciousness of this riverscape in human mind is not just a living mythical construct but finds an extension in history and henceforth an entanglement of both. It clearly glimpses that such riverine consciousness of Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam* doesn't confine itself to being a phenomenon of Hindu religion but delineates beyond religious boundaries it traverses from geography to culture and history as well and therefore, becomes marker of a nation altogether. That's the reason when contemporary pollution issues struck this river, it actually affected India's national unified identity and therefore, contemporary Indian eco-critic Vandana Shiva commendable assertion "if Ganga lives, India lives: if Ganga dies, India dies" (qtd. in Baker *Creativeboom.com*) becomes immensely relevant and beyond just environmental issues. This is not only for *Ganga*'s water resource and fertile land but Indian culture itself is dependent upon this river for its 'culture geography' which leverages enough scope for legitimizing India's strand of 'unity in diversity' in the truest sense.

3 Ecology to Spirituality: Crossings through River

The 'cultural geographies' within riverscapes of India are mostly rooted in their sanctity either spiritual or religious. For Cynthia Erb "it is a common Holistic belief in the interconnectedness of spirit and matter, the mind and the body, the individual and the community, and the sacred and the profane" (5) and in the Indian context the lineage of such

⁷ Abul Fzal or Shaikh Abu al-Fazal ibn Mubarak (1551-1602) was one of the trusted member of Emperor Akbar's court. He composed the historical book *Akbarnama*, which consists the official documentation of Akbar's reign in three volumes. *Ain-i-Akbari* is the third volume of this book.

⁸ 'Brahmin' is the highest caste in Hinduism. Persons of this category are mostly renowned practitioners of priestly or sacred rituals.

interconnectedness between ecology and spirituality is even elemental within ‘Upanishadic’¹⁰ and ‘Vedic’ traditions that did explore the true nature of spirituality as much as they did the plurality of conscious and unconscious things amidst the universe. Such *mélange* of ecology and spirituality is a kind of “unifying vision, not an already made-up one, but something that neither segregates or homogenizes - a holistic plurality that easily accommodates oneness and differences” (29-30) according to Murali Sivaramakrishnan’s schematic vision of eco-spiritual approach. This particular combination becomes substantial for one either by experiencing it through reading ancient scriptures or through self-perception of ecology. In both the cases of experience, river in India is an intrinsic medium of transition between ecology and spirituality and the underlined content of the same is perceivable within the literary image of rivers by Indian writers from poetry to narratives. It is primarily because biologically “each of us- every man, woman and child- is a small river, ebbing... flowing... seeking replenishment... from the elderly to the young, the rivers within each of us need continuous supply of clean, fresh water” (Swanson 150) and equally to suffice our spiritual craving, “in small towns by the river/ we all want to walk with the gods” (Mamang Dai *Dalitweb.org*).

Although the presence of gods is not a prerequisite to experience spirituality but when it comes to the eco-spiritual values of the river like *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati* in India, the religious spirituality attuned with them becomes imperative. In fact, in the entire process of ‘crossing’ from ecology to spirituality rivers of India become the active tool and as per *Upanishad*, such ‘crossing’ is not a literal cross-over rather, a spiritual transition towards an illuminated world of knowledge or *Brahman*, a kind of transcendence of the mundane life or *Samsara*. The tie-up of river within this process has been elaborated by Diana L. Eck (1981):

Samsara, the ceaseless flow of birth and death and birth again, was likened to a river, and the far shore became an apt and powerful symbol of the goal of the spiritual traveler as well: the indistinct horizon of sure ground on the far side of the flood, beyond the treacherous currents. (324)

Therefore, river ensures a significant make-over for individual’s spiritual experience and its references are derivable in the narratives of Neelum Saran Gour since her characters’ experience such ‘crossings’ of mundane to spiritual as part of their riverine ‘self-realization’ within and beyond the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam*.

The process of ‘crossing’ for the characters of Gour is extensively embedded within the practice of certain ever lively beliefs and rituals. It is partially indicated before, that people have a craving for experiencing godly presence in rivers which is extremely pertinent in the case of river *Ganga* as it is often addressed as a deity in India. In fact, it is through their day to day addressing or even sometimes chanting that people consciously or unconsciously provide exuberance of their riverine beliefs as well as experience them, reflections and representations of which are ample in Gour’s narrative paradigm. In *Invisible Ink*, while riding on the boat near Allahabad’s confluence and well much before the wild currents, the boatman prays to the goddess *Ganga* and once it’s over, he praises the river as “Jai Ganga Maia Ki Jai” (Gour 65) i.e. ‘hail to mother Ganga, praise’ and also chants “Har Har *Gange*” (Gour 65) i.e. ‘hail goddess Ganga’. Such circumstantial utterances postulate both people’s divine belief for river and their practical experience of the same which constantly suggests ecological and spiritual infusion reverberating Sivaramakrishnan’s notion of ‘holistic plurality’.

Extension of ‘crossings’ from ecological river to the spiritual one through human beliefs, also finds its origin in the purifying myth of Gangetic water or *Gangajal*, particularly the water near *Triveni-Sangam*. The meeting of these three rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati* is believed to connect three *lokas* (the realm of spaces) of the heaven, the earth and the underworld. Therefore, water of this particular riverscape is considered most auspicious and bathing or *snan* in the convergence of three divine rivers, i.e. *Triveni-Sangam* is believed to be the holiest practice that is supposed to cleanse or purify all the sins of earthly life since *Gangajal* is believed to carry essence of *amrit* (nectar). In fact a joint report submitted by different Indian Institute of Technology entitled “Cultural-Religious Aspects of Ganga Basin” highlights that “significance of a holy dip is believed to be far more on special occasions e.g., *Makar Sankranti*, solar eclipse, *Mahakumbh* etc.” (18) and this is perhaps because people can extendedly internalize spiritual values through collective (*samashiti*) experiences in festive days and that is the reason behind pilgrims assembly in specific bathing days: “bathing days,

¹⁰ ‘Upanishadic’ refers to the traditions aligned by ancient compilation of Hindu sacred scriptures *Upanishad*. Possibly composed between 400 -200 BC, these are some esoteric as well as mystical doctrines of antique Hindu philosophy and for Patrick Olivelle “Upanishads are the scriptures par excellence of Hinduism” (3). Marking a transition from Vedic ritualism, the entire corpus of *Upanishads* played a significant role in the formation of spiritual core of Hinduism and subsequently became “a part of the spiritual arsenal of rank-and-file Hindus” (Doniger 3).

Paush Purnima, Makar Sankranti, Mauni Amavasya¹¹, we (Allahabadies) leave to our pilgrim guests and visitors” (Gour, *Allahabad Aria* 69). Not only external visitors and pilgrims but the residents of Allahabad are no exception as they indulge in purified bathing ritual in *Triveni-Sangam* during festive season as Mr. Triloki from *Allahabad Aria* utters that “for us, Allahabadies, it (Vasant Panchami) is the day we go to take our dip” (Gour 69). Other than special occasions, bathing itself in *Ganga* is considered holy and it is an intrinsic part of *Allahabadies* collective identity as it offers scope for the ‘self’ to be connected with the ‘whole’ for instance, in *Invisible Ink* Rekha’s father goes to “take a holy dip in the *Ganga*, appealing to his Hinduhood, his Prayagness, his suppressed nostalgia” (Gour 61). If bathing is not possible, the purification can be done at least by sprinkling water of the same as Naina from *Allahabad Aria* suggests Mr. Triloki that “oh, at least go and put some *Ganga* water on your heads” (Gour 71) and also another woman Vimla “lifted two palm-fuls of water and drank it, eyes closed and an old remembered mantra on her lips” (Gour 72). All these references from Gour’s narratives exemplify not only people’s firm beliefs in *Gangajal* but also their internalization of the same for its miraculous power of purification which obviously marks the spiritual transcendence through ecological river.

Such spiritual transcendence of *Allahabadies* through river extends its signification in the great bathing festival of *Kumbh mela* which is basically a series of Hindu festivals and rituals celebrated in the month of January and February near the *Triveni-Sangam* of *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, and *Saraswati* river; *Maha Kumbh* is celebrated once in a twelve years and *Ardha Kumbh* in six years’ gap, and the yearly version of this religious fair is known as *Magh mela*. The grandeur and mysterious ambience of this festival since centuries fascinates people of India and also foreign travelers. Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang reported in seventh century A.D. that he witnessed the mesmerizing sight of millions of people coming near *Sangam* and taking a dip to release themselves from earthly pains. Even these ritualistic beliefs and its practices in *Kumbh mela* spell bounded western foreigner like Mark Twain who astonishingly has remarked that,

It is wonderful, the power of faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and the frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining. It is done in love, or it is done in fear, I do not know which it is. No matter what the impulse is, the act borne of it is beyond imagination, marvelous to our kind of people, the cold white. (qtd. in Gupta 58)

The appeal of this *mela* across temporality remains same to the western visitors. Gour in her short story “Family Album”: “The Kumbha Mela, you dumbos. That’s what I’m here for. I’m a photographer for *The International* and I’m covering Kumbha” (*Allahabad Aria* 59) mentions the incredible experience of western photographer Jameson. All the overwhelming practices associated with *Kumbh mela* within the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* might not be understood in core by foreigners like Twain or fictitious Jameson but it becomes elemental part of ‘24 carat Allahabadi’.¹²

The spiritual ambience postulating *Kumbh mela* surroundings is also submerged extensively in the Hindu mythological tales, according which *Triveni-Sangam* is that holiest place where one drop of *amrit*¹³ fell from the *kumbh* or urn after the churning of ocean by both *devas*¹⁴ and *asuras*. According to Hindu belief, *Kumbh mela* is celebrated since then to commemorate the divine amalgamation of *amrit* with the holy water of *Ganga*. Across temporality this festive series sustains its auspiciousness which draws millions of pilgrimages and visitors from entire India and outside in the *Sangam*. In fact, such huge is the impact of this *mela* is that in 2017 UNESCO enlisted it as a representative of ‘tangible cultural heritage’ and the importance of ecological *Triveni-Sangam* in such construction of cultural heritage is well perceivable in the words of Mechtild Rössler, for whom ‘cultural landscape’ is,

at the interface between nature and culture, tangible and intangible heritage, biological and cultural diversity – they represent a closely woven net of relationships, the essence of culture and people’s identity... they are a symbol of the growing recognition of the fundamental links between local communities and their heritage, humankind and its natural environment. (334)

¹¹ ‘Paush Purnima’, ‘Makar Sankranti’ and ‘Mauni Amavasya’, all these are Hindu religious festivals to be celebrated in the Hindu month of *Magh* i.e. January-February.

¹² Neelum Saran Gour in a conversation with V. Sriram, points herself out as “24 carat Allahabadi”. It is perhaps to endorse her genuine life long association with Allahabad city which is the place of her birth as well as career. See: <https://www.thehindu.com/lit-for-life/the-session-city-lights-had-authors-anjum-hasan-abdullah-khan-and-neelum-saran-gour-in-conversation-with-v-sriram/article26026263.ece>

¹³ As per the antique scriptures of *Rig veda* ‘amrit’ is nectar of immortality.

¹⁴ *Devas* are gods and *Asuras* are demons as per Hindu mythology.

One such ‘cultural landscape’ or more specifically cultural riverscape *Sangam* gets inseparably merged with the lives of Allahabad people and Gour’s narratives often but not always reflect upon this ecological and spiritual bridge up.

Such cohesion between ecology and spirituality in *Triveni-Sangam’s Kumbh mela* extended its mystic quotient in human perception often through the presence of *Naga sadhus*¹⁵ whose ash smeared bodies, matted waist-long hairs and plunging “into the roiling river in a thunderburst of booming voices” (Gour, *Invisible Ink* 68) often instigate the feeling of divine within that riverscape and its outcome is noticeable in Rekha’s step mother’s gesture towards these *sadhus* as she “raised her folded hands to her forehead, bowed and offered obeisance” (Gour 68). The impact of this eco-spiritual ambience is so intense that people collectively can recognize themselves within it and that is what impels Rekha’s utterance “we found ourselves in the thick of Magh mela, its acres of bamboo pavilions, its dense grid of sandy pathways” (Gour 66). Such collective recognition puts forth ‘pluralistic’ nature of this festival which not only provides space to pilgrims rather, “thousands camped on the banks of the Ganga, ash-smeared ascetics from the great mutts of India, ordinary people come to mediate and do penance for a month, tradesmen, artists, acrobats” (Gour, *Requiem in Raga Janki* 222). Therefore, pilgrims, visitors and others get a chance to be together implicitly marking this riverscape of *Sangam* as a unifying platform for humanity where religion hardly matters. Gour’s another novel *Invisible Ink* outlines this well where Hindu and Muslim communal gap has been shadowed forth only through the secular flows of *Triveni-Sangam* that offers inclusive participation in *mela* beyond religion as evident from the rickshaw puller’s utterance, “some Illahabad Mussalmans do take a dip in the Ganga on holy bathing days” (Gour 189). However, if not for bathing, there is no religious constraint in accessing the festive riverscape and that’s what Rekha and Amina do since their childhood. So inclusive it is in nature that Mahant Ganga Puri of the Mahanirvani Akhara¹⁶ rightly asserts, “Kumbha weaves our nation into one” (qtd in Maclean 6) as Indians from various parts “wearing every conceivable Indian costume, speaking every conceivable language” (Gour, *Allahabad Aria* 66), all attend *Kumbh mela* with decisive enthusiasm.

The oneness which this riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* offers both in religious scale and human- nonhuman tie-up, is the cusp of eco-spiritual ‘crossing’ that further extends in the river based rituals like ‘*asthi visarjan*’ or immersion of ashes in the *Sangam*. Following mythological lineages as mentioned before to liberate souls from the cycle of birth and death most of the Hindu people keep firm belief in *asthi visarjan* in the river of *Ganga* near *Triveni-Sangam* as this particular riverscape is the holiest arena in Hindu religion. This particular ritual as per beliefs extends *moksha*¹⁷ confirming the souls everlasting residence in eternity and so is the belief of mass: “anyone who wanted moksha had only to claim that tree (Akshayavat or banyan tree) and hurl himself into the river” (Gour, *Invisible Ink* 63). Such beliefs are extensively embedded in the psyche of Indian people that they consciously chose to immerse the ashes of their near one in *Sangam* to liberate their all earthly pains as the soul will get merged with water of Ganges and thereby, easily can reach heaven. The same belief is implicitly manifested in Gour’s short story “Southern Cross” when Bablu and his father immerse the *asthi* (ashes) of Bablu’s mother in the *Sangam*: “she who’d become one with the river. When the urn with the ashes was tipped over the edge of the boat at the Sangam in Allahabad” (*Allahabad Aria* 4). More references of this rite are mentioned in Gour’s another novel *Requiem in Raga Janki* in which Janki and her brother Beni immerse Manki’s *asthi* in another *Ganga ghat*¹⁸ named *Manikarnika ghat*¹⁹, “he tilted the urn. Together they watched its contents fall in a dusty downpour, rest afloat an instant on the rapid current before sinking, dissolving before their eyes” (289). All these illustrations reflect the in depth beliefs of Indian people for river but astonishingly enough in mainstream scholarship river is mostly illustrated either as an entity of physical geography or ecology. Beyond these disciplinary gridlines it is primarily the transcendental values of the rivers across centuries that signify the innate ‘crossing’ from ecology to spiritual world concocting human and non-human world. In fact, within this transcendental flow of river an individual can locate or for so experience the inner most ‘self’ of his/ her own validating the ‘crossings’ from ecology to spirituality in its connotative sense.

¹⁵ *Naga sadhus* are sacred ash (*vibhuti*) smeared Hindu ascetics. They stay almost naked except for garlands and beads. In the festival of *Kumbh mela* they assemble from various parts of India in large number near the *Triveni-Sangam*.

¹⁶ The term ‘Akhara’ refers precisely the place for spiritual core which is often used for religious renunciations

¹⁷ The concept of *Moksha* connotes a kind of salvation as per Hindu beliefs. It liberates souls from the complex cycle of worldly birth and death.

¹⁸ ‘Ghat’ in Indian subcontinent refers a series of steps towards a body of water mostly rivers. *Ghats* or more particularly *Ganga ghats* are considered as holy bathing place after funeral rituals in Hindu religion.

¹⁹ *Manikarnika Ghat* is one of the most famous *Ganga ghats* and it is situated in another North Indian city Benaras.

4 Experiencing River as Experiencing ‘Self’

Without any grain of doubt the entire aforementioned section of ‘crossing’ through river invariably grounds scope for human experiencing the river or for that matter riverscape which is presently the *Triveni-Sangam* near Allahabad city and for critics like Manzo it is only “‘experience-in-place’ that creates meaning” (74). This meaning can even be extended in realizing the meaning of ‘self’ which people internalize as an extension of their riverine spiritual experiences since “the spiritual is primarily an experience that affects the inner individual responding with his/her inner sense, the *antahkarana*”²⁰ (Sivaramakrishnan 39). There are ample instances in Hindu mythology where learned saints did chose to sit beside *Ganga* as a part of their *antakarana* or self-realization process and it was because of their firm beliefs in *Gangajal* to possess direct divine connection. Within such process of self-realization, they not only enlightened themselves but also incited profound affection for the river and so intense is the tie up between personal enlightenment and river, that in twenty-first century as well, Swami Sivananda in his book *Mother Ganga* instructs that for ‘self-realization’:

sit alone on the banks of the Ganga. Meditate. Concentrate. Realise how spiritual vibrations accelerate your inner heart, even overriding your guilty conscience. Where one experiences the supreme joy that fills you now (all of a sudden). How does She instantaneously withdraw your mind and conscience from the physical world to the regions of immortality, only to suckle you with bliss and blessedness! (19)

Such is the transcendental power of river *Ganga* that can connect human conscience with spirituality extending to the process of ‘self-realization’.

Significantly enough this process of *antahkarana* or sense of the ‘self’ within riverscape is not delimited within any particular religion, rather anyone can internalize such eco-spiritual nuances of ‘selfhood’ through respective experiences and again for this entire process, individual need not to withdraw himself/herself from *samashti* or the collective but can realize the ‘self’ as a part of the whole. Mobilizing upon the Eco-spiritual frame of Sivaramakrishnan “the self-aware individual seeks for a holistic experience that completes his/her internal being in the collective becoming of the spiritual” (40) and this includes completion of their ‘selfhood’ through ‘felt experience’ of ecology which presently river. In fact, the projection of Neelum Saran Gour’s riverine environmental imagination in her select writings through the experiences of her character’s like Janki, Bablu, Mr. Triloki etc. justifiably aligns this issue and also reflects such experiencing of ‘self’ as an offshoot of experiencing river or for that matter riverscape, if to be interpreted minutely. Gour’s own edited volume *Allahabad: Where the Rivers Meet* indicates so where Arindam Roy voices that “the chill sands of the river banks (near *Sangam*) play host to searching discourses on the self, the meaning of life, and the nature of the divine” (35).

Therefore, the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* provides a set up for individual’s ideological immersion for oneness which this confluence primarily stands for; a holistic plurality between ecological riverscape and individual ‘mind-scape’. This issue is prevalent throughout Gour’s narratives and *Requiem in Raga Janki* is a prominent one. Here Janki as a practitioner of Indian classical music recognises herself aligned with river *Ganga* since her adolescence; in her early age she was in Benaras city beside *Ganga* and later pursues her career in Allahabad, the city beside Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam*. Therefore, her close affinity with river *Ganga* is a deeply rooted one and it gets reflected in her musical acquisition process which further elucidates her process of ‘self’ realization. She feels the *swara*²¹ of her music floating with the river *Ganga* and she continues learning music and simultaneously internalizing it best with this flow: “to see the image of your truth in the slow waters of a river... descends into the stream and flaps its wings in joy and takes off again, ah, that was music, the *riyaz*”²² (Gour, *Requiem in Raga Janki* 20). In its deepest layer it signifies the human quest for truth in any aspect of life which is presently the musical quest in Janki’s life and the intermittent connection of quest completion with the flow of river, is evident from Janki’s experiences. She has not only completed her quest of musical *swara*, but also internalizes the flow of *ragas*²³ as a classical singer extensively through the medium of river *Ganga* and in her perception “if music was likened to the great rolling stream of the *Ganga* in the rains... then the *ragas* might well

²⁰ In Hindu philosophy ‘Antahkarana’ refers to the totality of intellect and emotion and their working as a whole. According to Vedāntic literature, this *antahkarana* comprises four parts namely *Ahaṅkāra* (ego), *Buddhi* (intellect), *Manas* (mind) and *Citta* (memory).

²¹ ‘Swara’ or ‘Svara’ has a Sanskrit origin which refers to musical note. More explicitly, it is an antique Indian concept regarding the fulsome dimension of pitch in music.

²² ‘Riyaz’ is an Urdu term which refers musical practice.

²³ ‘Raga’ is a melodic framework for Indian classical music.

be compared to the ghats” (Gour, *Requiem in Raga Janki* 72) for its distinctiveness. Even she as an Indian classical singer acquires proficiency over her skills in raga-sensibility and rhythmic-artistry through her internalization of the riverscape of *Sangam* and that’s why for her, this two skills “are like the two streams of the Ganga and the Yamuna meeting and blending in a mighty single stream” (Gour, *Requiem in Raga Janki* 93).

It is not that Janki’s riverine consciousness of Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam*’s only enhances the process of her musical internalization but there are other concerns too that finally enable her to realise her truest ‘self’ stimulating the process of her *antakarana* both as an artist and as a human being. She from her birth lineage is a Hindu but later converts to Islamism and her self-realization in its truest sense takes place only when she finds herself in the riverscape of *Sangam* where she went to immerse her ‘Saraswati’ idol (a symbol of Hindu religion) after her religion change. When she laid the idol in the exact juncture of *Ganga* and *Yamuna*’s meeting, she realizes that her religion change never puts a full-stop to her Hindu beliefs, it only adds another dimension and like the mythological river *Saraswati* which is considered as goddess of knowledge, Janki’s musical knowledge merged with her both religious beliefs proving a “fulsome continuity” (Gour, *Requiem in Raga Janki* 188) in her life. Just as three rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati* are distinct entities before the riverscape of *Sangam* but after meeting they all are merged into one pertaining attributes of all three, Janki’s experience in the same riverscape leads her to a surprising ‘self-discovery’ as “she found that she could sing ‘Raghubir aji raho more pyre’ (*Lord Krishna, stay today as my fiancé*) as well as ‘Madina mein mor piya vala hai re’ (*My love is blessed in Madina*) with equal fervor” (Gour, *Requiem in Raga Janki* 203) as a unified self. Here, the riverine imagination of Gour traverses the binaries of religion and formulates a unified whole of human and environmental cohesion elucidating the process of individual’s ‘self-realization’ and most importantly without withdrawing individual from the collective.

Not only *Requiem in Raga Janki*, Neelum Saran Gour’s another narrative *Allahabad Aria* also exemplifies intertwined process of riverscape experiencing as an indivisible part of self-realization and this nuanced issue is replete in the short story “Southern Cross”. Previous section briefly accounts Bablu and his father’s boat riding near *Triveni-Sangam* for the immersion of Bablu’s mother’s *asthi* (ashes). This experience of Bablu in his early childhood within the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* generates a holistic completion of his ‘self’ that even when he crosses the same riverscape after a long in his adulthood as Trish, he internalizes the same oneness of his family with the invisible presence of his father and even the dead mother “whose feathery essence disintegrated in the Ganga’s waters, racing swiftly downstream. It seemed then that they merged and flowed in his veins as his secret life stream even as the waters of the two rivers did, far beneath” (Gour, *Allahabad Aria* 17). It implicates the very realization of the ‘self’ by Bablu within the riverscape across temporal boundaries and most importantly not isolating the ‘self’ from the whole but much within the collective. This situation of Bablu draws innate analogy with the Baul²⁴ poet Phatik Chand’s song that “whoever can surmount the vortex/ of Triveni, / where three rivers meet, / will float forever / on the waves of time” (qtd. in Bhattacharya 106). Bablu not only experiences the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* but also internalizes the deep ecology up to the extent that ultimately it merges with his ‘self’ providing a completion of ‘selfhood’ in the truest sense, even transgressing the boundaries time and that’s what his grown up experience in the same place foregrounds.

Another short story “Family Album” from the same book *Allahabad Aria* also implicitly outlines the riverine experience as an offshoot of experiencing the ‘self’ that leads the characters to the recognition of the truth of life. Such is the experience of Mr. Triloki in *Triveni-Sangam* during *Kumbha mela* season. He was there mainly for his business purpose, to promote the designs of his jewelries but the eco-spiritual experience of the riverscape that he inculcates there, helps him to internalize the truth of his ancient designing passion. He recognizes the truth that ancient jewelry designs should not be lent out easily as it actually cheapens his passion and he internalizes this through the process of his experiencing the riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* at the time of *Kumbha* where he feels that nothing is permanent, not even the water of river, everything is in flow and that’s why the value which his designs are getting in this *Kumbha* may not get the same in next and in the narrator’s word “he (Mr. Triloki) wasn’t a man of articulate thought but the full weight of what they’d all shared rested on his mind. Like pilgrims taking a dip, the thought flitted through his head” (Gour, *Allahabad Aria* 71). Therefore, it won’t be exaggeration to consider the experiencing of riverscape of *Sangam* as an extension of experiencing the ‘self’ for people since by and by this eco-spiritual contour shapes individual’s realization process, interminably connecting the ‘self’ with the whole including human and non-human unification. It is the

²⁴ The ‘Baul’ or ‘Bauls’ are basically set of mystic minstrels mostly from Bangladesh origin. Some Bauls are also to be found in Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura.

widened scope of literature to capture this phenomenon which Neelum Saran Gour's imagination in her select writings brilliantly incorporates.

5 Conclusion

Analyzing Neelum Saran Gour's riverine environmental imagination in her select narratives *Allahabad Aria*, *Invisible Ink* and *Requiem in Raga Janki* through Eco-spiritual lens makes it imperative to note that in India, rivers like *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati* are not just ecological constructs; rather they are the lifelines of Indian cultural as much as spiritual heritage across centuries. On a surface Gour's select narratives may seem to outline only the topographical riverscape of Gangetic *Triveni-Sangam* near Allahabad city but the detailed analysis of the textual references implicates the in depth entanglement of cultural and spiritual nuances within this particular riverscape and also explores the nature of participation of people within it. In fact, the present reading projects though human experiences that river like *Ganga* or specifically riverscape of *Triveni-Sangam* becomes emotional, cultural as well as spiritual make up for Indian people even beyond religious binaries and the interdisciplinary framework of Eco-spirituality justifiably picturizes this issue. River *Ganga* with its transcendental power transgresses earthly boundaries resulting a 'holistic plurality' of human and non-human entities with which individuals realize their innate 'selves' connecting mundane to the spiritual.

Although these rivers are central in shaping of individuals' experiences within such rivers or for that matter riverscape are often found sidelined in the pressing research concerns with only exception of riverine imagination reverberating pollution issues. Other than pollution issue, awareness for ecological river can also be generated though the interdisciplinary studies like this connecting literature with Eco-spiritual realm, which at once pops up new avenues for literary research and simultaneously also makes people aware of the rich Indian riverine heritage with transcendental power. Significantly it is the imaginative space of literature extensively which provides scope always to look beyond the trend, beyond the visible and beyond the binaries of human and non-human, rather it postulates the unifying strands between human and ecology, often but not always overshadowing western distinction between reason and emotion which is unquestionably a postcolonial concern to reflect further. Remarkably enough, the present article justifiably touches upon this issue in deep utilizing the imaginative narrative space of Indian English author Neelum Saran Gour's select writings.

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