



Myth, Spirituality, and Water Cosmologies in Selected Modern Indian Poems

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ABSTRACT

Myth and spirituality have always played an important role in shaping how rivers are understood in Indian culture, giving them sacred and symbolic meanings. This paper aims to explore how modern Indian English poetry reimagines rivers as complex spaces where myth, spirituality, and everyday struggles come together. It focuses primarily on Keki N. Daruwalla's *"The Ghaghra in Spate"* and *"Boat Ride along the Ganga,"* A. K. Ramanujan's *"A River"*, and Jayanta Mahapatra's *"Dawn at Puri."* The paper aims to portray how water is not just a background setting but a powerful space where cultural beliefs and everyday experiences interact. This paper also intends to look at how these poems present "water cosmologies," where rivers connect the human world with deeper spiritual ideas. In *"A River"* and *"The Ghaghra in Spate,"* the poets highlight how nature can be indifferent and how myths often ignore the suffering of people during floods. On the other hand, *"Dawn at Puri"* and *"Boat Ride along the Ganga"* show the tiredness and chaos around religious practices by the rivers, questioning whether these sacred waters truly offer peace or simply reflect the cycle of life and death.

Introduction:

Mircea Eliade, a foundational figure in the history of religions, provides an ontological definition of myth that emphasizes its role in establishing reality. Eliade writes, "Myths narrate a sacred history. They relate events that took place in a primordial time, the fabled time of the beginnings... Every myth shows how a



reality came into existence, whether it be the total reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment: an island, a species of plant, a human institution” (Eliade, 1963). For Eliade, to tell a myth is to narrate how things came to be, effectively opening a window into the “sacred” time that stands apart from the mundane, linear “profane” duration of everyday life. Myth and ritual work in tandem to “enable us to discover the sacred, and recreate it”, providing the “reasons and purposes of things” that sustain human meaning in a seemingly chaotic world (Eliade, 1963, p. 18).

In contrast to Eliade’s focus on sacred origins, Roland Barthes approaches myth through the lens of semiotics and cultural criticism. In his seminal work *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that “myth is a type of speech... a system of communication, that it is a message... a mode of signification, a form” (Barthes, 1957). Barthes moves away from the traditional view of myth as an ancient fable, instead analyzing it as a “second-order semiological system” in which a sign from a primary system such as a photograph or a literary image of a river becomes a signifier for a new, often ideological, concept. This allows modern images, such as the “grand purifier” of the Ganga or the “destructive flood” of the Ghaghra, to function as myths that “naturalize” social and political meanings. By making contingent cultural values appear as “falsely obvious” natural facts, Barthesian myth masks the historical and human forces behind environmental and social conditions.

The definition of spirituality in this context is informed by the psychology of religion and existential theology. William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), defines religion which can be narrowed to the realm of personal “spirituality” as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1902, p. 42). James prioritizes the “personal” over the “institutional”, focusing on the immediate, subjective encounters that constitute the mystical core of human life. This perspective supports a reading of the speakers’ river encounters in Indian poetry as solitary, interior spiritual experiences that transcend doctrinal boundaries.

The term “water cosmology” refers to the web of meanings in which water connects humans, non-humans, and the sacred. Veronica Strang, in *The Meaning of Water* (2004), characterizes water as a “vital connective substance” and a “metaphor of social being” that encodes “social, political, moral, religious and environmental concerns” in its flows (Strang, 2004, p. 48). In her later work, *Water Beings* (2023), she shows how “water beings” such as the serpentine deities common in Indian myth mediate “between the natural and human worlds regarding the use and control of water” (Strang, 2023, p. 12). This



anthropological view defines water cosmology as a socio-natural system where water is a sentient agent rather than a passive resource.

In Hindu traditions, this cosmology is a sacred geography as devotees see God in all nature: mountains, rivers, springs, and other natural forms. In Purāṇic narratives, the rivers of India appear as goddesses who possess the power to absorb human sins and come to the Ganga, “the grand purifier”, to renew themselves. This traditional water cosmology is currently facing a catastrophic challenge. Tulasi Srinivas describes the Hindu view that “water is sacred, the origin of all reality”, but highlights the “paradox between Hinduism’s view of water as female, sacred and sentient, and the endemic pollution of water resources and climate-driven drought in contemporary India”. Her concept of a “runaway goddess” captures a cosmology where the primordial feminine water is both sacred and endangered, demanding a “riparian theo-ecology” that addresses the grief of the Anthropocene.

The intersections of mythic consciousness, individual spirituality, and environmental cosmology offer a profound framework for understanding the role of water in the Indian literary imagination. In the works of contemporary poets such as Keki N. Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, and A.K. Ramanujan, the river is not merely a geographical feature but a dynamic narrative force that mediates between the sacred and the profane, the primordial and the contemporary. By analyzing the Ghaghra, the Ganga, and the Puri shores through the theoretical lenses of Mircea Eliade, Roland Barthes, William James, and Paul Tillich, one can discern a complex “water cosmology” that reflects both the cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent and the burgeoning anxieties of the climate crisis.

Literature Review:

Sajjad, M. (2019). *A critical study of the imaginative world in Jayanta Mahapatra’s poetry. The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal*, 5(6), 38-40 explores the imaginative and socio-cultural dimensions in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra, emphasizing the interplay of myth, spirituality, and lived realities. This study is useful for the present paper as it highlights how place-based imagery and mythic consciousness shape poetic meaning, supporting an analysis of water cosmologies as sites of spiritual and social significance.

Dubey, B. K. (2022). *Dawn at Puri by Jayanta Mahapatra*. ResearchGate provides a comprehensive interpretation of “*Dawn at Puri*” by Jayanta Mahapatra, focusing on its rich imagistic structure and the interplay between myth, faith, and existential doubt. The study examines how the sacred landscape of Puri which is marked by the sea, temple rituals, funeral pyres, and marginalized figures like widows and



lepers creates a powerful contrast between spiritual aspiration and harsh social reality. Dubey further highlights Mahapatra's use of symbolic imagery to question religious practices and expose underlying suffering and uncertainty. This analysis is significant for the present paper as it situates water spaces (such as the seashore) within a framework of myth and spirituality, thereby supporting an exploration of water cosmologies as complex sites of cultural meaning, ritual practice, and human vulnerability in modern Indian poetry.

Chavan, R. P. (2020). *Portrayal of Indian life in Keki N. Daruwalla's "Boat-Ride Along the Ganga"*. *International Education and Research Journal (IERJ)* critically examine "Boat-Ride Along the Ganga" by Keki N. Daruwalla, highlighting the river Ganga as a central metaphor embodying the paradox of sacredness and pollution. The study emphasizes how the river-scape, ghat-scape, and pyre-scape collectively construct a disturbing image of Indian life marked by death, decay, and ritualistic practices, thereby questioning traditional religious beliefs. Chavan further argues that Daruwalla employs vivid imagery and irony to expose the tension between mythic reverence and socio-environmental degradation, leading to a sense of spiritual disillusionment and self-discovery. This analysis is significant for the present study as it foregrounds the Ganga as a complex symbolic space where mythology, spirituality, and harsh material realities intersect, thereby contributing to an understanding of water cosmologies in modern Indian poetry.

Kumar, S. (2025). *Kashi from a "Boat-ride Along Ganga"*. *International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL)* adopt a phenomenological approach to analyze "Boat-Ride Along the Ganga" by Keki N. Daruwalla, examining how the poem constructs the cultural and spiritual cosmos of Kashi through lived experience and poetic intentionality. The study highlights how urban space, particularly the riverine landscape, is not merely described but experientially mediated through imagery, memory, and symbolic resonance. By emphasizing the interaction between physical space and subjective perception, Kumar's analysis is valuable for the present research as it deepens the understanding of water bodies like the Ganga as dynamic sites of cultural meaning, spiritual engagement, and experiential reality within modern Indian poetry.

Mahato, A. S. (2023). Mythology and symbolism in A. K. Ramanujan's poem "A River." *Current Perspectives in Educational Research*, 6(1), 32–39 analyzes "A River" by A. K. Ramanujan, emphasizing the role of mythology and symbolism in enriching the poem's thematic depth. The study highlights how mythological allusions and river imagery contribute to a layered exploration of cultural memory, temporality, and human experience, while also critiquing the limitations of traditional narratives



in addressing lived realities. By situating the river within a broader mythic and cultural framework, the paper is particularly relevant to the present research as it supports the understanding of rivers as symbolic and cosmological spaces where myth, history, and contemporary life intersect in modern Indian poetry.

Sarkar, A. (n.d.). *Nature, culture, and environmental ethics: An ecocritical reading of A. K. Ramanujan's "A River."* offers an ecocritical reading of "A River" by A. K. Ramanujan, examining the complex relationship between nature, culture, and environmental ethics. The study highlights how the poem critiques traditional poetic conventions that romanticize nature while ignoring ecological imbalance and human suffering, particularly during floods and droughts. By foregrounding themes of environmental indifference and ethical responsibility, Sarkar's analysis is highly relevant to the present research as it frames the river not only as a mythic and cultural symbol but also as an ecological and ethical space, thereby enriching the study of water cosmologies in modern Indian poetry.

Maji, S. (2025). *Dismantling the myth of nature and naturalism in the select poems of K. N. Daruwalla.* Infogain Publication, examines the poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla through the lens of naturalism, tracing its literary roots and its transformation within Indian English poetry. The study highlights how Daruwalla challenges romanticized notions of nature by presenting it as harsh, realistic, and intertwined with socio-cultural conditions. By dismantling the myth of an idealized natural world, the paper foregrounds the complex interaction between environment, human experience, and historical context. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present research as it supports an understanding of water bodies and natural landscapes not merely as spiritual or mythic symbols but as dynamic, often unsettling sites within modern Indian poetic imagination.

Analysis:

In "Boat-Ride Along the Ganga," Keki N. Daruwalla critically engages with the mythic identity of the Ganga River, which is traditionally revered as a divine and purifying force in Indian culture. The line, "The concept of goddess baffles you / Ganga as mother, daughter, bride", encapsulates the river's multiple mythological roles and its deep-rooted cultural significance. However, the word "baffles" introduces a tone of uncertainty and skepticism, suggesting that these inherited myths no longer provide clear meaning in the face of contemporary realities. Rather than affirming myth, Daruwalla questions its relevance, exposing the gap between sacred belief and lived experience.

The poem also explores spirituality, particularly in relation to death, ritual, and the promise of transcendence. The Ganga, traditionally associated with salvation and moksha, becomes a site where



spiritual beliefs are both enacted and challenged. This is evident in the line, *“You face reality on a different plane / as where death vibrates behind a veil of fire”*, where cremation rituals suggest a transition from the physical to the metaphysical realm. However, Daruwalla’s imagery emphasizes the material and immediate aspects of death, thereby complicating the idea of spiritual liberation. Similarly, *“There is no lament... This much the mourners learn from the river”* reflects a subdued acceptance of death, which appears less like spiritual enlightenment and more like emotional resignation.

The poem most powerfully articulates the idea of water cosmology by presenting the river as a dynamic space where life, death, ritual, and everyday existence converge. The Ganga is not merely a physical river but a symbolic and experiential site that structures human understanding of existence. This is most strikingly captured in the lines, *“What plane of destiny have I arrived at / where corpse-fires and cooking fires / burn side by side?”* Here, the river becomes a liminal space where the sacred and the mundane coexist, dissolving traditional boundaries. The juxtaposition of cremation and daily survival underscores the river’s role as a continuum of life and death, reinforcing its cosmological significance. Through such imagery, Daruwalla reimagines water as a powerful medium that reflects existential truths, cultural contradictions, and the cyclical nature of human life, making it central to the poem’s philosophical depth.

In *“The Ghagra in Spate”*, Keki N. Daruwalla subtly engages with myth but largely undermines traditional mythic reverence of rivers. Unlike the sacred image of rivers in Indian mythology as nurturing and divine, the Ghagra here appears unpredictable and destructive. The line *“And every year / the Ghaghra changes course / turning over and over in her sleep”* personifies the river, echoing mythic tendencies to humanize natural forces, yet this “sleep” is unstable and dangerous. The absence of faith is striking in *“No one sends up prayers to a wasted sky, / for prayers are parabolic / they will come down with a flop anyway”*, where myth and religious belief are rendered ineffective. Thus, instead of sustaining myth, Daruwalla exposes its inadequacy in the face of real suffering, presenting a disenchanting, modern view of nature.

The poem powerfully constructs a water cosmology of violence, instability, and cyclical destruction, where the river governs human existence. The shifting identity of the river: *“In the afternoon she is a grey smudge... / At night she is a red weal / across the spine of the land”*, emphasizes its dynamic and uncontrollable nature. The sudden flood, *“the north comes to the village / riding on river-back”*, transforms the river into an overwhelming force that invades human space, erasing boundaries between land and water. The imagery of destruction: *“half a street goes / churning in the river-belly”* and *“houses sag on to their knees”*, shows how human life is subject to the river’s rhythms. Even after receding, the



river continues to shape existence, leaving behind ecological and social consequences. Thus, water is not merely symbolic but a cosmic force of creation and devastation, reflecting the fragility of human life within a larger natural order.

In *“The Ghagra in Spate”*, Keki N. Daruwalla presents spirituality in a deeply disillusioned and secularized form, where faith offers little consolation in the face of natural disaster. Unlike traditional Indian poetry that associates rivers with divine grace, the people here respond to the flood with resignation rather than devotion. This is evident in the striking lines, *“No one sends up prayers to a wasted sky, / for prayers are parabolic / they will come down with a flop anyway”*, which directly reject the efficacy of prayer and divine intervention. Instead of spiritual hope, the focus shifts to survival: *“there’s a slush-stampede... where they are doling out salt and grain”*, highlighting material necessity over religious faith. The villagers’ silence, *“They don’t rave or curse / for they know the river’s slang”*, suggests an experiential understanding of nature rather than a spiritual one. Thus, spirituality in the poem is not rooted in belief or transcendence but replaced by realism, endurance, and an acceptance of nature’s indifferent power.

In *“Dawn at Puri”*, Jayanta Mahapatra engages deeply with the mythic significance of Puri as a sacred space associated with salvation and divine presence. The reference to the *“Great Temple”* points to the Jagannath Temple, a major center of Hindu pilgrimage, where myth and faith converge. The line, *“A skull in the holy sands”*, juxtaposes the sacred (“holy”) with mortality (“skull”), subtly questioning the promise of spiritual transcendence embedded in myth. Similarly, the widows *“waiting to enter the Great Temple”* evoke the cultural belief that proximity to this sacred space ensures liberation. However, Mahapatra presents these mythic structures with ambiguity, exposing the tension between inherited beliefs and the stark realities of suffering, poverty, and death.

In *“Dawn at Puri”*, Jayanta Mahapatra presents spirituality not as abstract transcendence but as something deeply embedded in the lived realities of human suffering, faith, and mortality. The poem opens with the imagery of the seashore of Puri, where the proximity of the sea to everyday life becomes symbolic of the closeness between life and death. The line *“A skull in the holy sands / tilts its empty country towards hunger”* transforms the sacred landscape into a site of stark human deprivation, suggesting that spirituality exists alongside poverty and existential emptiness. As the poet shifts his focus to the Jagannath Temple, he observes *“white-clad widowed Women / past the centers of their lives / are waiting to enter the Great Temple”*, capturing a deeply ingrained religious yearning. Their *“austere*



eyes” that “*stare like those caught in a net / hanging by the dawn’s shining strands of faith*” reflect a fragile yet persistent spirituality: one that is sustained not by joy but by endurance and hope for salvation.

The imagery of dawn further reinforces this ambivalence; while dawn traditionally symbolizes renewal, here its “*frail early light*” falls upon “*ruined, leprous shells*” and “*a mass of crouched faces without names*”, suggesting that spiritual faith coexists with decay and suffering. The culminating image of the “*smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre*” linked to the poet’s mother’s wish for cremation reveals the ultimate spiritual aspiration of attaining liberation through death in this sacred space. However, the uncertainty in “*twisting uncertainly like light / on the shifting sands*” indicates that this spirituality is not absolute or reassuring; rather, it is tentative, fragile, and intertwined with doubt. Thus, Mahapatra portrays spirituality as a complex experience rooted in human vulnerability, where faith persists despite suffering, yet never fully resolves the anxieties of existence.

The poem constructs a powerful sense of water cosmology through its setting along the seashore of Puri, where land, water, life, and death intersect. The “*holy sands*” and “*shifting sands*” symbolize the fluid and transient nature of existence, shaped by the presence of the sea. The final image, “*twisting uncertainly like light / on the shifting sands*”, reflects instability and impermanence, reinforcing the idea that both faith and human life are constantly in flux. The coastal space becomes a liminal zone where rituals of death (cremation), natural elements (sea and sand), and spiritual aspirations coexist. Thus, water is not directly described but is implicitly central, shaping the environment and symbolizing the cyclical movement between life and death. Mahapatra’s portrayal transforms this landscape into a cosmological space where myth, spirituality, and existential reality converge in a deeply reflective manner.

In “*A River*”, A. K. Ramanujan presents spirituality in a deeply ironic and critical manner, exposing the disconnect between traditional religious consciousness and lived human experience. Set in Madurai, described as a “*city of temples and poets*”, the poem foregrounds a space historically associated with devotion, ritual, and sacred tradition. However, instead of celebrating spiritual depth, Ramanujan reveals a form of selective and superficial spirituality. The poets, who are expected to engage with the sacred and the human condition, “*only sang of the floods*”, ignoring the everyday suffering symbolized by the river that “*dries to a trickle in the sand.*” This neglect reflects a spiritual failure- an inability to respond to real human pain. The most striking critique emerges in the lines describing “*one pregnant woman / drowned, with perhaps twins in her,*” whose death is completely absent from poetic or spiritual discourse. While traditional spirituality often emphasizes transcendence and detachment, here it appears indifferent and dehumanized, overlooking individual tragedy in favor of grand, impersonal narratives. The ironic



observation that the river has water enough *“to be poetic / about only once a year”* further underscores how spirituality and poetic tradition are tied to spectacle rather than empathy. Thus, Ramanujan redefines spirituality not as ritualistic reverence or mythic celebration, but as an ethical responsibility: one that fails when it ignores suffering. The poem ultimately presents spirituality as hollow and inadequate, urging a more humane and grounded understanding of the sacred that acknowledges the realities of human existence.

In *“A River,”* A. K. Ramanujan critically engages with the mythic and cultural traditions associated with rivers in India, particularly within the sacred landscape of Madurai, described as a *“city of temples and poets.”* Traditionally, rivers in Indian mythology are revered as life-giving, purifying, and divine entities, often personified as goddesses and embedded in narratives of fertility, renewal, and cosmic order. However, Ramanujan subverts this mythic framework by exposing how poetic and cultural traditions selectively represent reality. The line *“The poets only sang of the floods”* highlights how classical poets glorified the river during moments of abundance, transforming floods into symbols of grandeur and vitality. Yet, this mythic glorification is deeply problematic, as it erases the human cost of such natural events. The repeated reference to *“three village houses”* and *“one pregnant woman / and a couple of cows / named Gopi and Brinda”* reveals the stark realities that myth and traditional poetry ignore. The most poignant critique appears in the lines describing the *“pregnant woman / drowned, with perhaps twins in her”*, whose suffering remains unacknowledged in mythic or poetic narratives. By juxtaposing mythic celebration with human tragedy, Ramanujan exposes the limitations and ethical shortcomings of myth. Rather than reinforcing traditional beliefs, the poem dismantles the romanticized vision of rivers, revealing myth as a constructed narrative that often overlooks marginalized experiences and inconvenient truths.

Ramanujan’s *“A River”* offers a powerful reconfiguration of water cosmology by presenting the river not as a purely sacred or life-affirming force but as a complex, cyclical, and often indifferent element within human existence. The river in Madurai is depicted across contrasting seasonal states: *“every summer / a river dry to a trickle in the sand”* and during monsoon it floods destructively highlighting the cyclical rhythms of nature. This duality challenges traditional cosmological views that idealize water as consistently nurturing and purifying. Instead, the river becomes a site of both scarcity and excess, reflecting instability and unpredictability. The vivid imagery of the dried riverbed: *“baring the sand ribs, / straw and women’s hair / clogging the watergates”*, evokes decay, stagnation, and the remnants of human presence, suggesting that the river carries traces of social and material life even in its absence. Conversely, during floods, the river transforms into a destructive force that *“carries away / three village*



houses... and one pregnant woman”, emphasizing its capacity to disrupt and erase human existence. This oscillation between dryness and overflow situates the river within a broader cosmological framework of creation and destruction, but without the comforting assurances of myth. The river does not moralize or redeem; it simply flows according to its own rhythms, indifferent to human suffering. Thus, Ramanujan presents water cosmology as a space of existential reality rather than spiritual transcendence, where natural processes expose the fragility of human life and challenge anthropocentric interpretations of nature.

Conclusion

The selected poems by Jayanta Mahapatra, A. K. Ramanujan, and Keki N. Daruwalla collectively reconfigure traditional notions of myth, spirituality, and water cosmology within modern Indian English poetry. While rooted in culturally rich landscapes such as Puri, Madurai, and the riverine spaces of North India, these poets move beyond romanticized or sacred representations of rivers and religious spaces. Instead, they foreground the tensions between faith and reality, myth and lived experience, and nature’s symbolic and material dimensions. Rivers and water bodies emerge not merely as spiritual or mythic entities but as dynamic forces that expose human suffering, social inequality, and existential uncertainty.

The study reveals that myth in these poems is not reaffirmed but often questioned and deconstructed, exposing its limitations in addressing real human experiences. Spirituality appears as ambivalent and fragmented, oscillating between deep-rooted faith and disillusionment, as seen in the contrast between ritual devotion and lived suffering. Furthermore, water cosmology is reimagined as a dual force of creation and destruction, where rivers symbolize both cultural continuity and ecological instability. Across all three poets, there is a consistent emphasis on human vulnerability within larger natural and cultural systems, leading to a shift from idealized representations to more realistic, critical, and introspective portrayals. These findings demonstrate that modern Indian English poetry engages deeply with tradition while simultaneously challenging and redefining it in contemporary contexts.

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