

# State of Praxis in *The Oath of Vayuputras*: An Eco-Critical Perspective

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**Abstract**—The depletion and drying of river water across India is a growing problem in the contemporary period. The ecologists have raised a huge concern regarding the depletion of river water in India. The drying, depletion, and disappearance of the rivers in India can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization. The ecological disturbance on land resulted in the loss of the Saraswati River. Amish Tripathi is a renowned figure in the realm of popular Indian mythological fiction. He has not only re-narrated the mythology of India but has also retold the history and geological reasons for the disappearance of the Saraswati River in his novel *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013). The research article views the novel from a deep eco-critical perspective to examine the rationale behind the drying and depletion of the Saraswati River due to the destructive production and disposal of Somras and its toxic waste in the river. The article aims at showing the ecological disturbance in the biosphere which is the result of the progress of the human race towards civilization. The shunning of the eco-centric attitude and the development of a capitalistic attitude in humans towards other living beings have resulted in this disrupted eco-system in the present biosphere.

**Index Terms**—depletion, deep ecology, destructive impacts, eco-criticism, rivers, Somras

## I. INTRODUCTION

Eco-criticism, Green Studies, or Eco-poetics calls for raising awareness among the readers about the need and responsibility of the human race to preserve and cherish nature. It highlights the exploitation of nature and mother earth beyond the limits of human beings. Joseph Meeker defines literary ecology as “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works” (1980, p. 29). The term ‘eco-criticism’ was first coined by William Rueckert in the essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism* (1978). The two seminal works that proclaimed the beginning of Eco-criticism are *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1999) by Lawrence Buell. They highlight the interconnection between literature and the surrounding environment. Eco-criticism calls for an eco-centered approach to human life. It states that the world should embrace the whole ecosphere. Eco-criticism brings awareness to the ecological disaster that has been created by man. It tries to change the perception and approach of human beings towards nature as their equivalent and not their subordinates.

India is one of the world’s most biodiverse ecozones. India has the most complicated and diverse ecological system. The country is equally facing diverse forms of pollution. Amish Tripathi in his novel *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013) addresses the most important problem in India – the depletion and drying of river sources. Amish tries to provide a logical reason behind the loss of the Saraswati River in contemporary India. His fiction portrays our predecessors' anthropocentric approach toward the river that has caused this loss to the contemporary successors of the Indian civilization. It highlights the ecological disturbances and disasters on earth that are caused due to human exploitation, neglect, and disrespectful attitude toward nature.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The current research article emphasizes the fact that the mythological novels not only teach or bring awareness of the rich mythical concepts and ideologies but also alarm the readers to be cautious while dealing with the ecosystems. The attitude and perspective of the individuals will decide the existence and preservation of ecological resources in the world.

Researchers like Lakshmi (2021) state that the Shiva Trilogy is a recreation of Indian mythology in contemporary fiction. *The Oath of Vayuputras* highlights the concept that too much of anything is bad as is found in the Bhagavad

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Gita 'Ati Sarvatra Varjayat'. The realization of individuals to sacrifice the 'swadharma' for the universal dharma leads Shiva to the stature of God.

Karthikeyan (2018) explains that retelling of mythology and history makes the understanding of epic and mythology interesting. The study contributes to the concept of greater good turning into greater evil of the time when it surpasses the natural limits of the law. Somras has been represented as evil and responsible for the sickness of the people. The rise of Sati, Ganesh, Karthik, Kali, and Shiva to godly stature is because they fought bravely against the greater evil.

Kangude (2017) comments that the Shiva Trilogy has broken the notion of popular fiction. Amish Tripathi's novel has been considered and critically analysed by critics, scholars, and serious academicians. *The Oath of Vayuputras* represents the reinterpretation of classical history in contemporary fiction. It is analysed from the perspective of historical revisionism and breaks the notion of historical objectivism.

Parihar's (2017) article traces the journey of Shiva from a warrior to the state of Mahadev. The article highlights the social cause of restoring equality and liberty in the autocratic Meluha and the bildungsroman development of Shiva from a common human being to Mahadev due to his valour and Karma.

Mishra's (2013) *The Oath of Vayuputras* gives the readers a sense of self-consciousness which leads to ethical wisdom and philosophical judgment. It also projects the self-centeredness of the Meluhans to sustain the life of their kingdom alone - using Somras and dumping its toxic waste into rivers to affect other states and people. The novel is an alarm to recognize the Indian culture and abide by the Laws of Nature.

### III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

The above reviews project that the novel has been analysed from different perspectives and theories but it has not been viewed from an eco-critical perspective. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill in this gap by bringing out the hidden ecological issues inside the novel. Thus, the main objectives of the study are:

- 1) To trace the reason behind the depletion of the Saraswati River in the novel.
- 2) To highlight the destructive impact of Somras on the human race in the novel.
- 3) To examine the basic tenets of deep ecology in the novel.

The current research article adopts the qualitative and descriptive research methodology to analyse the novel *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013) by Amish Tripathi.

### IV. EXPLOITATION OF RIVER

The rise of industrialism around the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and its spread around the whole globe had positive as well as negative impacts on the environment and the attitude of human life. The human relationship with nature before industrialization was balanced, conservational, and eco-centric, whereas in the contemporary world it has become anthropocentric and capitalistic.

Rivers are not only a significant resource of biodiversity but they also mark the development of humans towards civilization. In India, the Indus Valley civilization was the first step toward the developing nation called 'Hindustan'. Rivers contributed to water, food, transport, and agriculture in ancient times. At present they have gone a step ahead of contributing to an energy supply through hydropower for electricity. 96% of the water on earth is saline, only the rivers provide us fresh drinking water in the world. Rivers are a great support to animals, birds, and various aquatic plants which balance the ecosystem.

India is considered the land of rivers. Sadhguru states that "In this culture, we did not see rivers as just water bodies. We see them as life-giving gods or goddesses" (2017). In India, the rivers are considered to be sacred and revered as Goddesses in the Hindu religion. India has a large network of Himalayan and Peninsular rivers. The Himalayan rivers are Indus, Ganga, Yamuna, and Brahmaputra whereas the Peninsular rivers are Mahanadi, Godavari, Krishna, and Cauvery. Just like the two sides of a coin, rivers are honoured as Goddesses and they are polluted and exploited. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) report of 2015, 61,948 million liters of urban sewage are produced daily in India but the installed sewage treatment capacity is only 38%. It highlights those 38,000 million liters of untreated sewage water are let out to mix with rivers and lakes which leads to pollution in groundwater (Dasgupta, 2018). According to the CPCB report on *Assessment of Impact of Lockdown on Water Quality of Major Rivers* (2020-21), during the Corona Virus pandemic, the water quality of rivers became alleviated slightly due to minimum discharge of industrial waste, no access to pilgrimage, transport vehicles, etc. On the other hand, it can be observed that dead bodies of the Covid-19 patients were dumped in the most sacred river Ganga in India which has increased the pollution level of the river and simultaneously which will increase the contagious disease spread among the Indian population (Dutta, 2021).

The CPCB report on polluted river stretches released in 2018 states that the rivers of 31 states and Union Territories do not meet the criteria of good water quality. The report also points out that Maharashtra has the highest number of 53 polluted river stretches. The other states are Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Gujarat, Odisha, West Bengal, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Uttarakhand, Mizoram, Manipur, Jammu & Kashmir, Telangana, Meghalaya, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, Nagaland, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim, Punjab, Rajasthan, Puducherry, Haryana, and Delhi.

The issue of water pollution is not a concern that has cropped up recently but it has evolved slowly since ancient times when civilization began. This concern of exploitation and depletion of rivers is raised by Amish Tripathi in his novel *The Oath of Vayuputras*. It provides a different interpretation for the loss of the Saraswati River from the earth.

#### V. SCIENTIFIC VERSION OF SARASWATI'S DISAPPEARANCE

Saswati Paik (2009), a researcher in Geographic Information System (GIS), comments that during the Pleistocene glaciations, the large glaciers from the Himalayas broke and melted to form the 'Sapta Sindhu' rivers. The 'Sapta Sindhu' rivers include Saraswati, Satadru (Sutlej), Vipasa (Beas), Asikni (Chenab), Parosni (Ravi), Vitasta (Jhelum) and Sindhu (Indus). The river Saraswati flowed from 6000 to 4000 B.C. The river had its origin in Bandapunch Massif. Saraswati had three tributaries - Shatadru (Sutlej), Drishadvati and Yamuna. The channels of this river still exist as Ghaggar, Hakra in Rajasthan, and Nara in Sindh. Till today there is a disagreement among the geospatial experts on the course of the Saraswati River; few say that the upper course of the Saraswati River is Ghaggar and the lower course is the Hakra river while others state that Ghaggar is the weak and declining stage of the Saraswati River.

The Saraswati River saw its decline from 5000 to 3000 B.C. in the Quarternary period of the Cenozoic era due to various ecological catastrophic events. About 1.7 million years ago, the landslides and avalanches led to the destabilization of the tectonic plates. These tectonic disturbances had their effects on places like Siwalik, Potwar in Pakistan, and Assam in India. The Himalayas was uplifted which led to the cutting off of the melting water supply to the Saraswati River. Later the Saraswati River became dependent on the monsoon rains which filled only lakes and pools. Slowly the Saraswati River was disintegrated into a dry channel bed. It has not dried up entirely but still has some stretches of water.

The Haryana government (Express News Service, 2021) informed that 70 organizations which included ISRO, GSI, SOI, ASI, ONGC, NIH Roorkee, BARC, and Saraswati River Research Institute are working unitedly to revive the Saraswati River and its cultural heritage. The research documents also state that the river is still following as an underground stream from Adi Badri to Kutch in Gujarat.

#### VI. AMISH TRIPATHI'S SARASWATI RIVER

Amish Tripathi in his novel, *The Oath of Vayuputras*, claims that Saraswati is the mother of the Sapta Sindhu Civilization. He tries to provide a mythical reason for the disappearance of the Saraswati River. Tripathi has used the Saraswati River as an example to warn the readers about the negligence and depletion of river sources that would lead to the loss of many rivers like Saraswati for our future generations. It's highlighted in the conversation between Shiva and Ganesh in the novel: "Shiva smiled. 'The Lord Almighty has blessed this land with too many rivers. India can never run short of water!' 'Not if we abuse our rivers the way we are abusing the Saraswati'" (Tripathi, 2013, p. 68).

Tripathi also highlights the network between different rivers in India. He mentions different river names such as Saraswati, Tsangpo, Brahmaputra, the Indus or Ganga, Narmada, Chambal River, and the Godavari, etc., The rivers in the novel do not just serve as water resources; they also provide protection and transport facilities.

The novel *The Oath of Vayuputras* reveals to the readers a few important secrets of the whole Trilogy. The secrets are: i) the greatest good of the century has become the greatest evil i.e., Somras, and its impact on Saraswati River, ii) the toxic waste of Somras and its side effect on humans, and iii) Brahaspati, the chief Meluhan scientist, who was presumed to be dead is alive.

#### VII. SOMRAS AND ITS DESTRUCTIVE IMPACT

The chief Meluhan scientist, Brahaspati, who was thought to be dead, was alive in Panchavati, the Naga Land. On seeing him, Shiva understood that Brahaspati had created the illusion of his death and he was the one to destroy Mount Mandar by gaining allegiance with the Nagas. Shiva and Sati were shocked; many questions were popping into their minds. Brahaspati started to explain the politics and the destructive impact of the greatest good, Somras had on natural resources and humans.

Somras was a medicinal potion that was created to make people live a long life with healthier bodies. In the beginning, it was given only to the Brahmins to enable the great intellectual men to contribute to the welfare of society. But later Lord Ram wanted it to be given to the whole populace without discrimination. The more it was produced, the more became the side effects upon nature and humans.

The first sign was the birth of the Nagas due to Somras. The prolonged usage of Somras impacted the child in the womb of the mother. The children were born with deformities. The Somras removed poisonous oxidants from the individual's body. It also removed the limit of mutation of the body cells which led to diseases like cancer and extra outgrowths such as arms and a very long nose. Brahaspati revealed this to Sati and Shiva, he said:

'Yes. Therefore, your cells keep dividing while remaining healthy. In most people, this continued division is regulated. But in a few, some cells lose control over their division process and keep growing at an exponential pace.'

'This is cancer, isn't it?' asked Sati.

‘Yes,’ said Brahaspati. ‘This cancer can sometimes lead to a painful death. But there are times when these cells continue to grow and appear as deformities – like extra arms or a very long nose.’ (Tripathi, 2013, p. 16)

The second sign was the plague of Branga. The toxic waste of Somras could not be disposed of upon the land as it would contaminate the groundwater and it could not be disposed off in seawater because it would react as explosively. Hence it was disposed off in the Tsangpo river in the Himalayas as the cold water would dilute the poisonous impact. But when the water entered the Brahmaputra, the rise in temperature led to the reactivation of the toxic effect. The toxic water was consumed by the people due to which they suffered from the plague. Children suffered from body-wracking pain and cancer, and the impacts became higher during summer. On hearing this, Shiva was shocked and exclaimed:

‘By the Holy Lake,’ said Shiva. ‘The Brangas are being poisoned by the Somras waste.’

‘Exactly. The cold waters of the Tsangpo dilute the poisonous impact to a degree. However, as the river enters India in the form of the Brahmaputra, the rising temperature reactivates the dormant toxin in the water. Though the Branga children also suffer from the same body-wracking pain as the Nagas, they are free from deformities. Sadly, Branga also has a high incidence of cancer. Being highly populous, the number of deaths is simply unacceptable.’

Shiva began to connect the dots. ‘Divodas told me the Branga plague peaks during the summer every year. That is the time when ice melts faster in the Himalayas, making the poison flow out in larger quantities.’

(Tripathi, 2013, p. 21)

The Brangas used the medicine made by the Nagas or the medicine extracted by killing the sacred peacock. Hence, they were banned from religious sites like Kasi because they killed the sacred peacocks. These were the deadly impact of the Somras on human beings.

#### VIII. DEPLETION OF SARASWATI AND TSANGPO RIVERS

In the novel, Tripathi points out that the Somras had a destructive effect when consumed, produced, or disposed off on the earth. To make and stabilize the potion of Somras, a large amount of Saraswati’s water was used. The other river waters could not stabilize the Somras as efficiently as the Saraswati’s water. The toxic waste was also dumped into the river which caused the depletion of the other rivers in India. The dying of the Saraswati was pointed out by Brahaspati as:

‘Consider this: we Meluhans choose to believe that the Saraswati is dying because of some devious Chandravanshi conspiracy. This is not true. We are actually killing our mother river all by ourselves. We use massive amounts of Saraswati waters to manufacture the Somras. It helps stabilize the mixture during processing. It is also used to churn the crushed branches of the Sanjeevani tree. I have conducted many experiments to see if water from any other source can be used. But it just doesn’t do the trick.’ (Tripathi, 2013, p. 17)

Similarly, the disposal of the toxic waste of Somras was even more deadly than its production. It was dissolved in the Tsangpo River in Tibet. The reason for disposing off the toxic waste was because it became inactive in the icy-cold waters and the channels of the river flowed through uninhabited lands. Brahaspati explained this scientific reason to Shiva:

Brahaspati continued. ‘What seemed to work was fresh river water. When used to wash the Somras waste, over a period of several years, fresh water appeared to reduce its toxic strength. This was proven with some experiments at Mount Mandar. It seemed to work especially well with cold water. Ice was even better. Obviously, we could not use the rivers of India to wash the Somras waste in large quantities. We could have ended up poisoning our own people. Therefore, many decades ago, a plan was hatched to use the high mountain rivers in Tibet. They flow through uninhabited lands and their waters are almost ice-cold. They would therefore work perfectly to clean out the Somras waste. There is a river high up in the Himalayas, called Tsangpo, where Meluha decided to set up a giant waste treatment facility.’ (Tripathi, 2013, p.19)

This drying and depletion of Saraswati and Tsangpo rivers were due to the mass production of Somras which increased the longevity of people. It also led to the destruction and disturbance of the natural ecosystem. The Somras created various catastrophic results like the Nagas, the Branga Plague, and the drying and depletion of Saraswati and Tsangpo rivers.

#### IX. DEEP ECOLOGY

Deep Ecology as a movement began against the European and North American industrialist culture which only emphasized a human-centred approach to life. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, ‘deep ecology’ is defined as “a movement or a body of concepts that considers humans no more important than other species and that advocates a corresponding radical readjustment of the relationship between humans and nature.” Deep Ecology calls for an ‘egalitarian’ and ‘holistic’ approach with ‘phenomenological methodology’ towards the natural environment. The deep ecologist appeals for treating all biota in equivalence because the whole world prevails in ecological interconnectedness. The proponents of the Deep Ecological Movement, who contributed to the development of the theory - are the Norwegian Arne Naess, the Americans George Sessions, David Rothenberg, and the Australian Warwick Fox. The

phrase 'Deep Ecology' was initiated by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the article *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary* (1973). In the title, the term 'Ecology Movement' Naess refers to the cosmology or the worldview.

Naess says that mainstream environmentalists are shallowly focused as they make reforms and preserve wildlife biodiversity because of the utility and consumption needed for the human population to survive on earth. Whereas Naess in 'Deep Ecology', proclaims to respect, reform, and preserve the wildlife biodiversity as the individual independent population of its own like that of the human population on earth. According to Naess, "the deep ecology movement is not a slight reform of our present society, but a substantial reorientation of our whole civilisation" (Naess, 1990, p. 45).

Like Naess, deep ecologists Bill Devall and George Sessions, emphasise that there is a deep interconnectedness of humans with nature. They declare in their work *Deep Ecology* states that "if we harm the rest of Nature then we are harming ourselves. There are no boundaries and everything is interrelated" (1985, p. 68).

Naess along with George Sessions, an American environmentalist, developed an environmental platform with eight important principles which form the basis of the deep ecology movement. These principles are called 'The Eight-Point Platform of Deep Ecology'. A few points are as follows:

1) The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.

...

8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes (Naess 1986, p. 4).

#### X. DEEP ECOLOGY IN *THE OATH OF VAYUPUTRAS*

In the novel, *The Oath of Vayuputras*, a few basic tenets of Deep Ecology are emphasized by Amish Tripathi. Among the eight principles of Deep Ecology, five of them have been voiced profoundly in the novel.

The first tenet is that "the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes" (Devall & Sessions, 2010, p. 456). From this perspective, it can be observed in the novel that the Meluhan civilization had become anthropocentric concerning Somras. To restore the balance and intrinsic value of human (i.e. Nagas and Brangas) and nonhuman (i.e. rivers) lives on earth Shiva had to fight a holy war. Shiva proclaims it as: "Evil should never be fought with subterfuge, Kali," said Shiva. 'It must be attacked openly' (Tripathi, 2013, p. 22).

The second tenet is that "richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves" (Devall & Sessions, 2010, p. 456). It can be observed in the novel that the richness and biodiversity of India have not only resource value but also offers natural protection to the inhabitants of the land. These calamities like the drying and depletion of the Saraswati and Tsangpo rivers are due to the loss of their values or reverence in the eyes of greedy humans.

The third tenet is we as "humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs" (Devall & Sessions, 2010, p. 457). The Meluhans or any other civilization has no right to infringe, destroy and deplete the natural resources like rivers and other resources provided by God. They have been provided by God for the sustenance of life rather than for luxury and greed.

The fourth principle is that "present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening" (Devall & Sessions, 2010, p. 457). In the novel, it's witnessed that the toxic waste is dumped into the Tsangpo river which has channels running through the uninhabited lands of Tibet but the question raised is its effect on fauna and flora that would be higher than that on humans (as the plague of Branga). The intrusion of humans is disrupting the ecological balance of the biosphere.

The fifth principle that is hinted at in the novel is "the ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great" (Devall & Sessions, 2010, p. 457). The Meluhans were just raising the standard of living with different lethal inventions like Somras but Shiva resumed the quality of life through the holy war by destroying Somras forever. While re-establishing the universal dharma (i.e. life quality, giving equal inherent respect and value for human and nonhuman life), he lost Sati and retired to the claustrophobic Himalayan Mount Kailash and lived an ascetic life (i.e. life quality).

#### XI. CONCLUSION

The author, Amish Tripathi, has not only recreated and retold the rich Indian mythology but has also pointed out the shift from ecocentric life to anthropocene life which marks the beginning of environmental and human health degradation problems. *The Oath of Vayupturas* warns the readers that though the luxury of scientific inventions is like elixir (Somras) in life, they must be used with caution and note - 'Elixir is poisonous in excess'.

Shiva in the novel states that “I was thinking that the primary source of Evil is human greed” (Tripathi, 2013, p. 133). The greed for preserving the Somras by the autocratic Meluhans leads to the depletion and drying of the Saraswati and the Tsangpo rivers, the birth of the Nagas, the plague in Branga, and finally the great holy war. Such an autocratic perspective toward nature has led to the disappearance of the Saraswati River for the forthcoming generations.

The deep ecological perspective of the novel reveals that humans have to provide intrinsic value to human and nonhuman lives. Humans have been provided with nature only for sustenance, and not for its exploitation in any form. They should stop interrupting the cycle of the ecosystem and laws of nature and should concentrate on raising the quality of life (i.e., wisdom, peace, knowledge and love towards human and nonhuman forms of life) rather than just raising their materialistic standard of living. Thus, the novel, *The Oath of Vayuputras*, contributes more connotations to the readers when they read critically from different perspectives. It gives a proclaiming call to human civilization to revert to an eco-centric approach to life and earth which will sustain mother earth and the quality of human life.

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